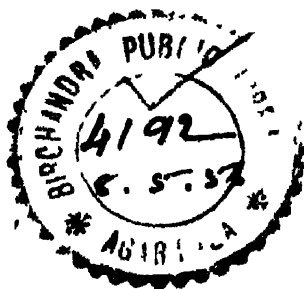


THE LILY AND THE ROSE

by
YVONNE SEAGER



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**TO GARETH
WITH LOVE**

***All the characters in this book
are fictitious and any resemblance
to any person, living or dead, is
entirely accidental***

CHAPTER I

ALICE KIMMIDGE sat on a tombstone in Hólborn and peered hopefully through the railings, on the look-out for people with dogs. She'd counted four in Hammersmith and thirteen between Barkers and the Albert Hall, but here in Holborn, people didn't seem to go in for dogs. Or shopping baskets. Or prams. . . . They looked busy and important and rather cross: and the shops sold office equipment or men's tailoring and were hardly worth looking at, from Alice's point of view. So she bit the end of her stiff little pigtail that was no thicker than a No. 9 paintbrush, but whose white bow proclaimed a gala day, and found the gesture comforting, until she remembered it was babyish, and dropped the end guiltily. She tried counting buses, and craned eastwards for a glimpse of St. Paul's, because her mother had told her she could see it from the churchyard. But the spring haze had hidden St. Paul's completely, and there was a monotony of buses, and after watching a party of coloured students till interest bordered on rudeness, Alice went back to looking for people with dogs.

St. Agnes the Martyr was a thin, sooty building, supported once by local residents, when there were blooms in Bloomsbury and debtors in Newgate. Now its parish, like its ground, had virtually disappeared. A main road bounded it, buildings pressed on its three remaining sides—a furniture showrooms, a brewer's depot, an office block. Its ground was reduced to a path of sunken flagstones, three lichened slabs (Alice was sitting on one) and a few rounded headstones, set against the wall of the church itself, like pegs at the end of a seedbox. But instead of carrots and cabbages and beet, kitchen-maids and coachmen were planted there, the commoner vegetables of the

parish. Alice, remembering the pets' cemetery at Lancaster Gate, which her mother had once pointed out to her, examined the stones eagerly, but they were too weathered to make out.

Nobody famous, built St. Agnes, or was buried there, or had ever been numbered among its worshippers, but it was generally busy. Its minister was willing to marry divorcees, provided that they had not been divorced too often or too blatantly. Which accounted for Alice's presence there that morning.

Alice's feelings, as she sat in her new check coat and felt the slab rough on her bare thighs, were both scared and elated. A new and wonderful life was opening before her. She had no idea what it held, but she welcomed it, confident her darkest hours were behind her. The citizen beneath her might have felt much the same on waking. . . . He, too, might have risen stiff and cramped in the bright spring sun, to the sound of voices and organ music. The organ was playing a hymn.

It was not a hymn that Alice knew. Sitting on the tombstone had given her pins and needles, so she stood up (she could now see over the railings instead of through them) and stretched and yawned. There was green on her new white socks (the only green in that grey churchyard) and she rubbed it with her gloves, making it larger. Then she took the gloves off, and pressed her hand on the discoloured stone, so that the pressure mottled her palm. She called to the heavy, magenta-breasted pigeons, but seeing she had nothing to offer them, they ignored her. She screwed up her eyes to see an aeroplane, and watching its smoke-trail puff out to nothingness, until her neck ached. She wondered why St. Agnes had been martyred, and how, and whether it hurt very much. She thrust her hands into her new, forbidden pockets and played with the edge of a sixpence. Time passed slowly.

Alice was tremendously impressed by Vivian, and nervous of him—although he'd promised she could live in the

country and have a puppy—and even more nervous of his friends. She was a true Friday's child, loving and giving, but there was nothing left in the whole world to give to Vivian, and loving such an exalted person seemed impertinent. A private does not love his general: he salutes and obeys.

Even at ten, Alice was leaving childhood behind. She knew that the most awful thing in the world was not to have money, although nice people insisted money wasn't everything, and mother and daughter were careful to be nice. To be interested in money was bad taste, and if you displayed bad taste (her mother explained) the very people you wanted to know, that is, the people who could help you, who had money and could afford to be nice, would never be interested in you. . . . It was like Up Jenkins. You could call each other's bluff, but you never admitted your hand was empty. Alice, who still stumbled over her multiplication tables, practised a social code a hundred times more complex. She adored her mother, and naturally accepted her values. Growing up in Diana's bitterness, she was unaware of it.

She thought of to-day as a sort of gateway in their lives. A gateway into sunlight. The price of entry was small—Vivian Carter for a stepfather—and her mother was paying for both of them.

It had seemed such a miracle at first, that Alice had never thought whether Vivian was a nice person, or not. Her mother was going to marry him, which begged the question. When the time came, she was glad to escape the ceremony. Excitement always made poor Alice sick, so Diana suggested she stay outside, and try to see St. Paul's.

As a matter of fact, Alice wasn't as excited as her mother imagined. She distinguished in her mind between a wedding and a marriage. Weddings, she knew from school-friends and the women's magazines her mother read, were for brides. The bride always looked beautiful and wore white, like the doll on top of a Christmas tree. Her father gave her away, her mother cried, friends threw flowers and

confetti and made a great fuss. But Diana was only marrying Vivian. It was different, somehow.

Diana had explained that it was because she was a widow. (She didn't consider it necessary to mention Vivian's divorce to the child.) Widows didn't wear white, confetti was messy, and someone had to sweep it up, hadn't they?

'Were you a bride when you married Daddy, then?'

'Of course I was.'

'Well, did you have a white dress, and bridesmaids? And cake with real marzipan, that you cut with a sword? Haven't you any photographs——?'

'No, darling. You see, it was war-time.'

But war-time was just one more word to Alice. Like Daddy. Like summer holiday. Something other people had, which didn't concern her. Her feeling of disappointment remained. 'Can we tie shoes to the back of Vivian's car, then?' That would be fun. And she had in mind just the pair she wanted to get rid of—her black ones, which had always hurt——

'Good heavens, no.' Diana sounded quite cross and shocked. 'Vivian would loathe it. Vivian . . . doesn't like jokes.' The words were ominous, even then.

So to-day her mother was being married (not wedded) in a stiff, shiny suit and a hard little hat, and a large mauve flower that didn't smell at all, and nothing was to be thrown and no one might cheer, because Vivian would loathe it.

Alice went back to her tombstone and ran a stubby finger over the lettering, trying to make it out. Normally, she wore glasses, but for to-day, her mother had told her to leave them off, and she missed them. The stone said JOS CHAPMAN, Grocer, born at somewhere-rubbed-out in Hampshire in seventeen sixty-something, died at Holborn in 1823. She wondered why the 's' of 'Jos' was carved small, with a line under it, but she was not an imaginative child. She wasn't unduly worried about staying with a lady Vivian knew during the honeymoon. She'd been assured (by

Vivian) of her welcome, and implored (by her mother) to be good, and as she was a child desperately anxious to please, she meant to be very, very good. She wasn't curious about this Mrs. Lunt, or why she'd volunteered to look after her. She wasn't curious either why grocer Chapman might have left his native Hampshire and come to London, what his daughters were called, or what he charged for sugar. She wondered very much whether Vivian would buy her a dachshund or a sealyham, but not why he called her 'Diana's female appendage' and asked her how about boarding schools.

A sales tricycle passed under the railings, and Alice forgot her mother and Vivian, and even the promised pet. The man was selling ices, and she had sixpence in her pocket. She scrambled off her tomb and reached through the railings, finding nothing incongruous in her position. 'A tub, please. Pink.'

The salesman was quite startled. 'What d'you think you're doing in there? You ought to be in school.'

Alice explained politely. She was waiting for her mother who was inside the church, and it was holiday time, anyway.

'Church on a weekday?' He stared at the closed doors as if he expected to see Diana carried out, feet first. Then he pushed the tub through to Alice and rode off, whistling.

Alice sat down again on Mr. Chapman, and was happily licking her spoon, unaware of pink splashes on her coat, when the doors opened suddenly and her mother appeared, on Vivian's arm, with a pack of faces behind them.

Alice's new stepfather looked at her in disgust.

CHAPTER II

DIANA MONROE began the second war in white ankle socks. Diana Kimmidge finished it as widow and mother. When the holocaust receded, war widows were ten a penny. Her friends were loud in urging her to re-marry, and Diana herself was not unwilling. 'You'll never manage alone, my dear . . . and with your looks, you needn't.' It was easy to talk. None of them introduced a suitable young man, free and willing.

Dr. Monroe had been a country doctor, better known for kindness than diagnosis. He talked weather to farmers, trade to publicans, treated old ladies with a gallantry that delighted them, and kept barley sugar in one of his many pockets. He had a huge moustache, liked to mow his own lawn and fiddle with his rockery, referred all non-medical decisions to his wife, and adored his daughter. Mrs. Monroe, a large, stately woman, was given to long necklaces and water-colours. Her home and her family were her life: her only ambition was to see her daughter similarly provided. The Monroes had married fairly late in life, and Diana was their only child, and somewhat spoiled. How two solid yeomen parents had produced a willowy, Morgan le Fay of a girl, remained a mystery. They did everything possible for her—except train her to earn her living in a competitive world.

Alice's Daddy (generally referred to as 'poor old Tim') had never risen above his first, commissioned rank. He'd been killed on D-day. Not killed in action, but as good as in action. He'd overbalanced from an invasion barge speeding to its appointment on a Normandy beachhead. Weighted with equipment, he sank before anyone could grab him, and it was impossible to stop and search. Dur-

ing the night the summer sea, finished already with him, laid him among his companions fallen at the water's edge.

For the next ten years, his widow lived with her daughter, her pension and her memories.

Diana's married life had consisted of an early morning ceremony in a Surrey church, with sirens wailing and her mother crying noiselessly in a pew behind her. Of Tim's four leaves, each was spent between a hotel bed and a round of musical shows and public-houses. She'd seen her husband in uniform, and in pyjamas. His effects, if he had any, had never come to her. But for solid little Alice, he might have been a dream.

Diana had been eighteen, and her husband nineteen, and he'd never looked beyond the Army. Or beyond the war gratuity the Army was to pay him some day. Tim, like his bride, had been very young mentally. And frankly, he enjoyed Army life—the companionship of other men, Mess jokes, beery Mess parties at which Diana, immediately pregnant, spent distressed hours in the cloakroom. He liked the idea of fighting—he felt the hell of a fellow in uniform—besides, that was how a lovely girl like Diana had noticed him. He never bothered about post-war jobs, trusting something would turn up. He might even stay in the Army. With luck, he'd be a full 'loot' by the end of the war. A captain. A major, even. . . . Drowning in the calm sea, a boy soldier who'd never fired a shot or faced an enemy, he must have felt horribly cheated.

Poor old Tim's pension went nowhere. Diana's father died at the beginning, and her mother at the end, of the war. With them disappeared the parental home, normal refuge of a penniless young widow, and the last shred of her background. Brave with inexperience, Diana faced the world alone. Not exactly alone, either. She had the handicap of a young baby.

Her mother's trinkets were soon sold, and the few hundreds the doctor had been able to leave her she sank in an unfortunate business with a woman friend. The

idea of hand-made children's clothes was perfectly sound, and Diana was a beautiful needlewoman, but the two women were only amateurs. They were expensive and slow, and they didn't understand advertising. The business dwindled, came to a standstill, sank into debt. It was sold up on the order of its main creditor, the landlord. Diana's only assets were pricked fingers and temporarily strained eyes. The friend shrugged, married and went abroad.

Diana spent a nightmare year trying all the jobs an untrained woman can try—canvasser, hairdresser's model, waitress. She tried to learn shorthand-typing at night-school, but had to abandon it. She couldn't pay anyone to stay with Alice. Her neighbour at shorthand suggested filmwork, and Diana tramped the casting agencies. They liked her looks—everyone always had—but warned her she'd get no work without a union card. 'I might as well stand under a lamp-post in Piccadilly,' she told the neighbour.

'You might get yourself kept'—the girl assessed her crudely—'but you'd never do as a casual. Don't you know anyone . . . ? All right, don't hit me. I was trying to help. And don't act so damn ladylike—you frighten people off.'

'I am a lady——'

'Forget it, then,' the friend advised. 'Look, here's some stuff I got for a blouse. You're clever, you can make up something for your kid. Oh, stop thanking me—there you go again. Pink just isn't my colour. It was a bad buy.'

Diana made a charming, expensive-looking little dress and Alice wore it to Mrs. Snape's, who took it as a proof of Diana's extravagance.

Mr. Snape was an uncle of poor old Tim's, a country solicitor in Buckinghamshire. Diana had understood (or as it turned out, misunderstood) that he'd been going to take her husband into partnership when Tim had completed the legal studies he'd abandoned so willingly for war. One evening, when Alice had added the misery of

a new-cut tooth to her mother's loneliness and disappointment, Diana wrote to Mr. and Mrs. Snaipe, introducing herself, and sending a snap of Alice. Mrs. Snaipe replied quite kindly, inviting her down for the day.

It had been a day of misfortunes. Diana missed her connection at Marlow, and kept Mr. Snaipe waiting forty minutes on the platform. Poor Alice, unused to trains, chose the moment of their arrival to be sick. Mrs. Snaipe gave Diana a limp hand and a lecture on child welfare for which her own pallid daughters were no advertisement. They seemed to be wearing faded green sacks, and Mrs. Snaipe explained proudly that she had 'run them up' from the discarded covers of the three-piece suite.

'Waste not, want not, that's my motto.'

'It's very sweet of you to ask us here——'

'I couldn't very well do less, could I, after your letter? Sit down. Sit down if you can—in that skirt you're wearing.'

Diana thought the three bloated, tow-haired, pale green daughters looked like nothing so much as three inverted leeks, and swallowed a wild desire to giggle. The tragedy of utter loneliness—she had no one to save the remark for. She dumped Alice on the carpet, and sat down. After an hour of cross-talk, it turned out that Mrs. Snaipe had never met Diana's husband, and Mr. Snaipe was himself the junior partner and had never promised his nephew anything.

'Cream?' Mrs. Snaipe poured pale blue milk into a cheap blue teacup. There were some nice old Worcester cups piled in a cabinet behind Diana, and she noticed them. Evidently the best tea service, and she didn't merit it.

'Sugar?' continued her hostess. 'Do have some. There's a very little lump that couldn't possibly hurt you. But I suppose you're like all the other young women—trying to slim.'

Diana, who was nearer starving than slimming, forced a weak smile. 'Home-made buns, delicious!' she murmured. They were nearly on fire with baking soda and seemed to be filled with gunshot. She reached down and

took one from Alice, who promptly screamed for it back. 'So difficult . . . children . . . war-time . . . food.'

'I had three children during the war, no domestic help, and Mr. Snaipe never missed a night's fire-watching,' Mrs. Snaipe told her. 'It's just a question of organisation. And that's what you young people haven't got down to—organisation.' She stirred her cup vigorously. The tea was the colour of the upper Thames after rain.

Diana checked her retort. How could she, with only one child and a husband no sooner trained than dead, compete? She wondered if their name was really Snipe, and Mrs. Snaipe's deadly gentility had wrought a sea change. If she had been older, calmer, she would have realised that her hostess was merely jealous of her. Of her youth, her vitality, her long slender legs (she caught Mr. Snaipe examining them), her future still before her. But at twenty, Diana had no idea of making allowances for other people. Her own troubles were momentarily enormous: she couldn't see over the top of the pile.

She thanked her hosts and escaped as soon as she decently could, thinking of Mrs. Snaipe's face when she found the puddle Alice had left on the drawing-room carpet, and of Mrs. Snaipe's legs, which were like the pillars of the temple clothed in semi-fashioned lisle.

The Snaipes (happily unaware of the impression they'd made, for they were well-meaning if pompous) sent her a Christmas card and a teddy bear for Alice that somebody had obviously played with already, despite its new ribbon. Diana, thanking them, mentioned an expected change of address. Thus the acquaintance died.

At last Diana saw an advertisement for saleswomen in a dress shop, and went to Helen Pageant.

Helen Pageant was a Mr. and Mrs. Goldberg, who talked Stepney overlaid with Knightsbridge, their combined height was possibly ten feet, and to the day she left, Diana thought of them as twenty grasping fingers. Mrs. Goldberg had unlikely red hair, the voice of a screech owl, and she never moved a foot away from the cash desk. Mr. Goldberg was

shorter and even fatter than his wife, more excitable, and he drove a black saloon car with the back fitted with rails for dresses. It was a small, good-class shop, employing several pretty girls and the owners, no different from a hundred others in London and the larger Provincial towns. The girls came and went—mostly to marriage. Diana stayed six years and she was fairly happy, apart from Mrs. Goldberg's voice.

She got used to the heat of the lights on summer days, to the deep pile carpet that made her feet ache, to the strategic mirrors, in one of which Mrs. Goldberg was always watching her. She got to know when a woman came intending to buy: or to pass an hour trying clothes on. She knew that often a fur coat and a smart dress concealed the most indifferent underclothes, and an outsize matron would paw a pretty gown longingly and then glare at her and say, 'Oh, it's the sort of thing you'd wear, I suppose. You could wear anything.' As if having model measurements implied easy virtue. Once (once only) a customer went out having purchased nothing, but slipped a ten-shilling note to Diana — 'For being so polite, dear. Now do get yourself a proper lunch.' Men occasionally accompanied their women to the shop, and stared at Diana calculatingly while the women spent their money.

It was outwardly a female world. The clothes were designed by men, tailored by men. The owner, the buyer, the shopfitter, was a man. The girls, chatting together for a moment while Mrs. Goldberg checked a bill or telephoned the workrooms, had only one idea. Men. But in her six years at Helen Pageant, Diana never actually met a man.

Every evening, when the clock brought release, she felt like a traveller stepping out of a sealed aircraft into a foreign land. Knightsbridge was exciting, with its closing shops and homing buses, its fruit barrows and evening papers. To-day the sun must have shone all day, the pavements were still warm, and a welcome breeze tugged her black skirt at street corners. . . . Yesterday was Christmas, with a hint of frost and singing, and gay parcels to be

hidden from Alice. . . . No sooner had the buds opened in the gardens where, with her daughter, she fed the ducks, than a gardener was sweeping up the leaves, and Alice was begging for fireworks. Time passed smoothly. Diana was sure of three meals a day. Emotionally, she was starving.

She was still in her twenties, and very lovely, but already her face had a bitterness in repose. She had sapphire eyes, a lot of black hair, a neat little white face, a remarkable figure, and no remarkable brains. Tall, she moved easily, not with that apology for height too frequent in English-women. Men noticed her, but she looked so unapproachable that it would have taken a brave man to accost her. The sort of men who accost women are not very brave.

Alice, for ever eating, growing, demanding, was her world. Diana was very fond of her daughter, although she frequently slapped her, and snapped at her. All her love, her interest and her service, she poured out on the child. She had no dreams of romance in which Alice wasn't happily incorporated. Never, except to a good boarding school, would she have let the child out of her sight.

When she was first widowed, Diana had a string of men friends who took her to pubs and cinemas and dancing: who had small noisy cars and no money and used the word 'actually' a lot. But they were unable or unwilling to shoulder Alice, so in time Diana dropped them, and presently they found someone unencumbered.

Diana asked only one thing of life—the opportunity to love and be loved by a man who could offer her and Alice a home. She made no conditions as to looks or status, age or income. Indeed, she didn't dream of riches. But she did dream of love.

Diana's tragedy—as her neighbour at shorthand had pointed out—was her inflexibility. She knew she was superior to the Goldbergs (it was her secret weapon against them) but superiority makes for loneliness. Mrs. Monroe's drawing-room, farther away, now, than the Vienna of a Strauss waltz, was still her standard. In all her dreams the

man who loved her was gently bred. She used slang and said 'bloody' and her spelling was outrageous, but she couldn't forgive a centre parting or a sunburst tie. She was down on Alice like a load of bricks for the smallest slip.

'For God's sake, don't crook your little finger like that. And don't call the salt the cruet——'

Alice, eating the high tea for which her school dinner was merely the hors d'œuvre, said wistfully, 'Did Henry the Eighth really eat with his fingers? I wish I had a chicken leg. . . . Mrs. Bates says only savages eat with their fingers.'

'Mrs. Bates is hardly an authority on etiquette.'

'What's that mean?' Alice sensed criticism of their landlady, of whom she was fond. 'Didn't she see the film?'

Diana was not particularly a snob. She clung to her early training for strength. As a drowning man to his straw. A martyr to his tenets. We are all intolerant of people who behave not quite as we do. But it made life difficult, and narrowed her acquaintance considerably. Especially, it made life difficult for Alice.

Poor Alice. She had her father's pinkish face and light, fine hair. Grey eyes, with fair but heavy brows and lashes, all but hidden by glasses. ('But if you wear them now, dear, perhaps you won't have to when you grow up.') Once a boy at school had shown her how to set a piece of paper alight through the lenses, but when she rushed home to show her mother in high glee, Diana had been quite angry, and said she'd burn the house down, next. She was a happy, healthy child, good-tempered and reasonable. She tried to copy everything her mother did and once—recognising the caricature—tackled a small boy for copying Diana. The price of victory was broken glasses, and her mother's displeasure ('My daughter, fighting in the street! I'm ashamed of you, Alice'), and Alice learned that her mother was more than playmate and provider. She was the law. To be obeyed, whether understood or no.

Alice was used, of course, to being left alone. To making beds and washing up and letting herself in with her own latchkey. To the free spectacle of a royal car, or a drunk's arrest. To the freemasonry of the streets and playgrounds. She had few possessions, and she wasn't covetous. Her idea of bliss was an invitation to Mrs. Bates' kitchen, when the landlady was baking her weekly batch of cakes.

One day she overheard Mrs. Bates talking to a neighbour. 'Poor little Mrs. Kimmidge—my second floor back, you know—she is a lovely girl. A bit hoity-toity, perhaps, but ever so sweet when you know her. It's too bad she has that child, like a millstone. You'd think that some of her relatives, or his . . .'

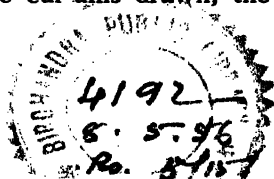
The neighbour agreed that men thought twice these days before saddling themselves, what with housing, and the cost of living. 'Hostages to fortune, that's what kids are.'

At this point Alice fled, and tackled her mother even before she got her coat off. 'Di, why is it too bad about our relatives? Why am I a hostage to fortune? Is a hostage heavier than a millstone?'

Diana turned rather white and clutched the child protectively, as Niobe clutched her youngest daughter. 'That's that Bates woman,' she muttered. 'Don't worry, Midge. I won't leave you. Well . . . we haven't any relatives.' Alice forgot the incident, but her mother didn't.

It was perfectly true about the relatives, of course. Her own parents were dead, and Tim had been an orphan. That's why she'd imagined his uncle, Mr. Snape, had been going to interest himself in Tim.

They lived in a small square room in Shepherd's Bush, backing on to the railway, and their window was opposite a signal-box. Diana said you could spit an orange pip across to it and hit the signaller behind the ear, and sternly forbade her daughter trying. Alice thought the signaller, whose name was Mr. Waller, a nice friendly person. When she waved to him, he waved back, but her mother insisted on drawing the curtains because he used to watch them dressing. With the curtains drawn, the



room was smaller than ever. The huge pink and red roses on the wallpaper (which Alice thought were beautiful, and her mother assured her were hideous) stood out, so that it seemed you could go round the walls, picking yourself a bunch.

There were only two main pieces of furniture—the bed and the dressing-table. Their clothes hung in a curtained corner: their washing dried on string: their cases, neatly stacked and covered with a remnant from Derry and Toms, formed a table top and hid the worst patch in the carpet. Alice's father grinned vacantly on top of the structure in his plastic frame, his shoulder hunched round to show the one, genuine pip of a second-lieutenant. Sometimes he fell down the back, and once he lay there for three days till Alice missed him, and searched.

Mother and daughter shared the bed, which creaked like a sailing ship at sea. In a trunk beneath it their summer clothes were stowed away with mothballs, and blankets and linen from the Surrey home, as well as two water-colours by Diana's mother: the Farm at Morning, and the Farm. Alice liked to roll on to her mother's pillow, and smell her perfume and shampoo and the tang of yesterday's tobacco from her ash-tray, out of which the red-scalloped ends always upset before they could be emptied. There Alice would puzzle about the importance of money, or dream of possessing a dog, while the tenants above stumped around with boots on (at least, Diana swore they did) and trains shunted about their business, and there was singing at closing time from the Shepherds' Arms opposite the house, or the Indian women downstairs started squabbling again in their high nasal voices. Diana had worried at first about Alice being in the room alone if she went out.

'But I am never alone,' Alice protested. 'Not lonely alone, anyway. And I know what you-bad-girl-go-to-sleep is, in Hindustani. Listen——'

There was no ambition in Alice. No dreams of fortune or greatness. Like her mother, she wanted intensely to love. Her dearest wish, in fact her only one, at present,

was to find an orphan puppy or kitten, and smuggle it home. And in time, it might give her back a fraction of the love she would give to it. Sometimes, when she thought of the warm, silly creature snuggled against her, her eyes pricked behind her glasses and her fat little arms ached with emptiness. It was dreadful to love so intensely, and to be chased out to play in the fresh air, just at the moment when the living pet had almost materialised out of her longing for it. Mr. Waller had a cat (he said) that stood up for God Save the Queen, and once caught a burglar. But Diana said old Waller was a liar, and don't lean out of the window so far.

Her only pet was a goldfish called Charlie. Charlie swam round and round his watery world, gawping for food, unloving and useless. Alice loved without stint—yet the only pet that Mrs. Bates allowed upstairs was one that defied loving. If only I had a DRY pet, one I could pick up, and stroke, and cuddle. . . . But adventurous fingers in Charlie's bowl threw him into a perfect turmoil of darting and lashing. If only I had ANYTHING soft and furry. But not wet.

Alice was relatively unmoved when Charlie was found one morning, floating at the top of his bowl, pale stomach upward, mysteriously, irrevocably dead. Hanging out of the window, she was able to attract Mr. Waller's attention. Mr. Waller was never too busy with trains to switch his points to a chat.

'Good morning, Mr. Waller. I say, my goldfish is dead.'

'Morning, me dear. Don't you lean too far, now. What's that? Someone dead? Eating shellfish? I never touch it.'

'It's not anyone. It's my goldfish, Mr. Waller.'

'Your Ma flicked cigarette-ash in the bowl, most like. Or you left it in the sun. Fish don't like sun. They're creatures of shade, they are.'

'I wish I had a parrot. One that could talk.'

'Parrots is dead. Talking ones, anyway. Takes seven years to teach a parrot talking—and some don't learn,

then. Know what I've got in me sandwiches, to-day? Bet you don't. Sardine!' Mr. Waller's laugh could be heard from Olympia station to Earls Court.

Alice withdrew. She tried to see the connection between Charlie dead and the signalman's sandwiches, and for the life of her she couldn't. She didn't think she'd really ask her mother for a parrot. Diana would never buy her a parrot on top of her new shoes and the pencil box. . . . Still, a boy at school had a white mouse expecting a family. The babies would be born bald, he told Alice. When they grew a coat and opened their eyes . . . If his mother didn't make him drown them, and the cat didn't get them . . .

When Diana came home, Charlie's corpse was duly disposed of, and the bowl washed out and put away. A dry-eyed Alice ate the usual large tea and went out to play rounders. In the doorway she hesitated, scuffing the toes of her new shoes. 'Mummy, will you be absolutely sure and put POCKET in my new dress and all my clothes from now onwards?'

'What do you want them for . . . particularly?' Diana knew that casual air of Alice's. Up to some new game, of course. And it was getting such a job, making all her clothes, now she was so big. 'Well?'

'Oh, handkerchiefs, and . . . things,' murmured the deceitful Alice. 'Mummy, you do like mice, don't you?'

Sometimes, Alice marvelled that her mother could miss so much—because none of the things around them meant anything to Diana at all. She made it clear that she had no time for the fun and pageantry of Shepherd's Bush. She kept herself to herself, and was an object of much interest and speculation to her neighbours: Alice adored all the neighbours, who were not interested in her at all. Diana didn't even want to hear about Mrs. Patna's baby's ailments, or Mr. Waller's brother-in-law Syd being tight in the Arms last Saturday, or the programme at the Empire this week, or the exhibition at Olympia next. She lay awake worrying about Alice's grammar, and Alice's future, and her own.

To her, the autumn race of plane leaves against the area railings seemed merely untidy, and reminded her that they both needed winter clothes. She expected to be cheated in the markets, with their bright, cheap goods and roaring flares. She accused the Indian women, their saris hanging a few enchanted inches under cheap tweed coats, of smelling. She grew tired of explaining to Alice that she was too big to trail after the Salvation Army band, and that standing round the chestnut roaster's brazier till he tossed her one was begging.

'Do all the beggars who sell matches live at Rowton House and die with lots of money?' Alice wanted to know.

'Good heavens, I don't know. Where's Rowton House?'

'Oh, Mummy'—exclaimed Alice crossly, making the discovery all children make at ten or thereabouts—'you don't know anything. It's a hostel, of course.'

There were other moments when Alice exasperated her mother, too. When she insisted she wanted to marry the milkman when she grew up, because she liked his horse. When she failed to discover an early talent for drawing or singing. When she refused to think what she wanted to be later on, or cared if she got a scholarship.

'But everybody has to choose something, and train for it.' Diana didn't want to say, Darling, I'm afraid you're going to be so plain! Next minute she found herself trying to explain why she hadn't trained, herself. 'Things were different, when I was a little girl.'

Alice, sprawled on the bed, reading a borrowed comic or chewing a pencil, knew Diana's litany of complaints by heart. 'If only there hadn't been a war. . . . If your father had lived. . . . If his uncle had taken him into partnership. . . . If I hadn't lost poor old Dad's legacy. If I won a football pool. If I had a rich husband—'

'Mummy'—Alice had no qualms about interrupting—'what's seven sixes?'

'Forty-two. Those nylons I got in your precious market have gone already.'

'Have they? No . . . I meant seven eights.'

‘Sixty.’

Alice raised her head suspiciously, a startled fawn.

‘Fifty-six,’ corrected Diana. ‘Hell, do your own arithmetic. Where are the matches? Run down to Mrs. Bates, there’s a poppet——’

When she came back, panting from the stairs, her mother asked her, ‘Darling, would you mind having a stepfather?’

‘Don’t suppose so. I say, you wouldn’t like to marry the milkman, would you? His wife died. He’s got a piebald horse called Joe. He used to have a skewbald, but I can’t remember what it was called. Mummy . . . you don’t know a stepfather, do you?’

Diana stubbed a cigarette, and closed the window. It didn’t shut out the noise of the trains, but the nights were cold. ‘No, Midge,’ she said thoughtfully, ‘but one day I might.’ Her face broke up in smiles, as it did when she made the most outrageous stories up to make Alice giggle at bedtime. ‘He’ll be disgustingly rich, and we’ll run away from him, and he’ll leave you a fortune! How’s that?’

Plain Alice had a one-track mind. ‘I would rather he left me a horse. Oh, Mrs. Bates wants her matches back. . . .’

Diana had some idea that telling the growing Alice minutely about her own happy childhood would compensate for any shortages in hers. But Alice was intelligent enough to make comparisons. ‘Why can’t I have a kitten, Mummy? You had lots of kittens——’

‘I could climb trees, too. If we had any trees. They won’t let you try, in the gardens. I bet I could climb out of the window and into the signal-box——’

‘But it’s August this month. Half the children at school are going to the seaside. Why can’t we go to the seaside, Mummy?’

Later she exclaimed, with unintentional cynicism, ‘Being good doesn’t get you anywhere, does it?’ She began to poke about in Diana’s cosmetics, which fascinated her. ‘Couldn’t you put my hair in curlers, instead of these?’

She held out a thin pigtail at right angles, and squinted sideways at it. 'Most of the children in the street have curlers every night. Ethel Jackson has a perm. Her mother did it.'

Diana explained that little girls with crimped hair and home perms looked cheap. A glazed look that her mother had begun to recognise came into Alice's eye. It meant that Alice no more understood her than if she'd spoken in French. Alice was tracing her initials in spilled face powder. 'I wish I lived in your childhood, Di. It was real, wasn't it?'

Diana had brought up her daughter to share her own hope that their drab life was only temporary. Alice, unbothered by happier memories, simply repeated her mother's opinion. She would have repeated it as trustingly if Diana had told her they were exiled princesses. One of her earliest memories she decided, years later, was Diana and her 'Monroe doctrine'. According to that, they 'really' ought to be living in a house in the country, with a garden full of hollyhocks and pinks (Mrs. Monroe's favourites), with a Daddy who went to work every day with a bowler hat and an umbrella, a vicar who came to tea, and an old servant who'd call her 'Miss Alice' and spoil and scold alternately.

'Why an umbrella when it isn't raining?'

'Professional people often carry them.'

'Colonel Piper plays his trombone under an umbrella—but only when it's raining.' The 'colonel' was an elderly Salvationist who'd taught Alice and her little friends such numbers as *Washed in the Blood*, and *Hell Fire's Burning*. 'He has someone hold it over him,' she added, destroying the picture Diana had absentmindedly drawn of the old man, the handle of the umbrella jammed into the back of his collar.

'Put all that bread together in a bag, Midge. We'll take it to the pond.'

Alice knew the pond so well. It was called Frensham Pond and lay hard by the Guildford Road, with a little

sandy beach and whispering reeds. Sometimes it had little sailing boats on it, and sometimes swans. In summer, there were adders in the heather, and in the autumn the beeches and the heather were all gold and purple. . . . Only she'd never been there. That was Diana's pond, the 'real' pond. The pond they were going to that afternoon was a make-believe affair in Kensington Gardens. . . . But Alice gamely treated her mother's memories as 'real' and the reality around them as false. 'Really' she was at boarding school by this time, playing hockey and wearing a strict uniform and writing letters that began 'Dear Mummy, Last week we played a match away and won. Please can I have some socks . . . stamps . . . pencils——' The sort of letter Diana had sent home from her boarding school. A bore to write, and a treasured memory, now.

The constant inversion made life difficult. It was like sticking a negative in your photo album and tucking the print in an old envelope.

Diana did, of course, make occasional acquaintances, and went out with them, but she was careful of her virtue and picked her escort for safety, rather than common interests. She was bored, and the man offended, and neither realised why. The day was classified as deadly, until Diana got so fed up with her own company that she tried again. Where her mother's men friends were concerned, Alice was never comfortable. Diana's disenchantment lay heavy on her, like an unwanted coat at a picnic.

'Di, was that Mr. Kendall on the phone, or Mr. Harmer?' The telephone had shrilled in Mrs. Bates' basement, dark and redolent of Sunday lunch, and Mrs. Bates had roused from her nap to overhear nothing more compromising than Diana's: 'Yes. No. All right, then. . . .' It was a blazing September afternoon and the airless streets were deserted. It was so hot that Alice had abandoned her game and slunk indoors.

'Only Rodney Harmer, Midge. Don't vanish.' Alice had soot on hands and knees and her new sunsuit was torn

already. Of course the child was at a loose end, Diana realised, and felt guilty about leaving her. On the other hand, if she didn't have some adult company soon, she'd start quarrelling with Alice.

'Is he coming here?' Alice was wandering round the wall, leaving paw-marks among the pink and red flowers. 'I wish this was a garden. I bet these roses would have thorns if it was. I wish it was a garden with a great big fountain like the one outside Buckingham Palace, and I could paddle in it. What time's he coming, Di?'

'He's fetching me at three.'

'Shall I take my glasses off?'

'Good Lord, no. Not for Rodney. He calls his sweet at lunch his "afters".'

Alice understood Rodney's status immediately. Passed for escort duties, but not one of themselves. 'Well, I should make him take you on the river, I'll go down to Mrs. Bates for tea, shall I?'

'Oh, Midge . . . do you mind? Here's a shilling, anyway. I'll be back to supper. But what will you do?'

Alice pocketed the shilling and rubbed her finger down her nose, leaving a streak. She leaned across the grimy window-sill to see if Mrs. Bates' cat was on the roof of the signal-box. 'Oh, I might go to Sunday school. It's free.'

Diana kissed her, and left her with many admonitions about not leaning out of the window, and thanking Mrs. Bates and not losing the latchkey, suspended on her immature bosom like a charm. Alice nodded patiently. She was writing her name on the window-sill in soot, and she hadn't left room for the 'e'. She had problems of her own. Whether Mrs. Patna's baby cried in Hindustani or English, and whether the ginger cat at the Shepherds' Arms had been fixed.

Rodney Harmer (unlike Mr. Kendall, who, as Captain Kendall, had been one of the few survivors of poor old Tim's invasion barge) was a young man who'd just missed the war, and who often sat next to Diana on the bus. They

began to say: 'Good morning.' Then to chat. He treated Diana with anxious concern—like a housewife dusting the best china. It was obvious he admired her very much.

Unlike Diana, who stopped book learning when she left school, Rodney only began it then. He was a fair, slight, earnest young man, an engineer by profession, and a keen student of politics in which, of course, he was Labour. He read copiously, furiously almost, as if time was against him, carrying about two or three volumes in public library binding, and copying extracts in a notebook. Diana lost every argument with him. Eventually she lost her temper, too. 'Well, I think Socialism's beastly. So did Daddy.'

Rodney Harmer smiled maddeningly. 'I understood you were a young woman who thought things out for herself.'

'So I do.'

'Oh, no, you don't. You don't know the first thing about Socialism—or any other form of government, for that matter. You're a political ignoramus. Worse, you don't merely fail to understand, you don't even want to know.'

'Oh, I certainly couldn't define all your *isms*. But I feel . . . Well, I feel one thing's right, and another's wrong.'

'Woman's intuition, in fact? Fortunately, nations aren't governed by intuition. Or by women, as yet. Supposing the Prime Minister acted on hunches, instead of appointing a standing committee to advise him?'

'Politics aren't my job,' insisted Diana, unwilling to admit defeat. 'You can't think how silly a woman looks, waving a banner, or . . . yelling at a meeting.'

'But women wave autograph books and yell themselves hoarse over a film star. They queue for hours to see royalty.'

'Women are interested in clothes, not principles.'

He looked at her curiously. Could so much beauty really hide a moron? Her little locked mind infuriated him, and his heart went wump! every time he looked into those black-fringed eyes. 'I really think you mean that,' he taunted her lightly. 'The magazine mentality! I could

never have believed it. . . . But what do you do when you're not concerned with clothes?'

'But I always am. It's my job. I sell them.'

'You don't sell them on Sundays. Diana'—he boggled over his first use of her name—'what are you doing after lunch next Sunday?'

It was the first of several Sundays, and Diana sometimes forgave Rodney for boring her (which he did, with his views on current events which she'd skipped in her own newspaper) because it was stimulating to have a man in love with her. Even if, in Rodney's own phrase, it was a unilateral undertaking. Diana allowed his attentions: but she didn't take them seriously. She even belittled him to Alice.

This Sunday, Rodney took her on the river, as Alice had suggested. They bussed through the hot streets to Richmond, then they stood in a hot queue waiting for a boat. But Diana looked cool as a lily in moonlight in her white dress. Rodney, pinker than usual, nearly burst with pride.

'That's—that's a very pretty dress you're wearing.'

'I made it myself.' Diana was worrying about Alice. Supposing the poor child went to Sunday school in that crumpled sunsuit, without washing and tidying? It was her own fault, for leaving her—

'It looks wonderful.' Vaguely, she wondered why Rodney was out of breath with standing still.

They got a skiff at last, and Rodney handed her in, holding her hand as long as he could and fussing over her comfort. 'You ought to have one of those parasol things. I wish I'd brought a camera. Will you hold my watch, please? Er, Diana, would you mind if I took my jacket off?' They began manœuvring on the world's most crowded stretch of water.

'Do we have to zigzag like that?' inquired Diana mildly. 'Couldn't we just row up—and then down?' She tried to avoid looking at Rodney in his braces and carefully knotted tie.

Unfortunately, he was no oarsman. He hit another boat,

became entangled with the painter of a second, missed a canoe by inches and caught a violent crab which sent them across the bows of an oncoming launch. Diana cried, 'Look out!' The man in the launch threw the wheel over as hard as he could, and they heard the rattle of crockery and alarmed cries. A well-deserved wave swamped them. Diana's summer dress dried soon enough, but Rodney's suit—a light, double-breasted one and obviously his best—never fully recovered for the rest of the day.

'That's the sort of man who's been pushing this country around too long. Damn Tory.' Rodney shook his fist after the launch. He couldn't swim, and he didn't want to admit it.

'Nonsense,' retorted Diana crisply. 'Just because you've never learnt how to handle a boat——' She'd heard the voices in the launch. 'Her' kind of voices. A wave of nostalgia, deeper and far more damaging than that which the launch sent over them, engulfed her now. The rest of the afternoon was spoilt. She was wasting her time with Rodney. She wasn't even enjoying the river.

'Look over there. Swans.' Rodney was still trying.

'I think you'd better look where we're going.'

She didn't want tea with him, or a stroll along the bank, or her hand held on the bus home. And yet she would have given anything to have loved Rodney, because he was asking her to marry him.

'I know you've got a kid. I can cope. I've got a good job and I mean to have a better. Mum's living alone since Dad died. She'll let us have rooms till we get a place of our own——'

She had to stop him, then. 'Thank you, but please—— No, don't go on. I appreciate your offer, but Alice and I are all right as we are. I really don't think I'd suit you, Rodney.'

'I'm old enough to know what I want.'

'And I know what I don't want! I don't want my views on everything challenged and my mind improved——'

'I know,' said Rodney grimly. 'And I'm not the little

gent of your day dreams, either. But I can give you something—more than you've got, now. Stop leading a spectator life, and join in! You're behaving like a maiden aunt, not a healthy young woman.'

'One marries for happiness. For love.'

'One marries,' mimicked Rodney. 'There you go again. ONE marries! I marry, you marry, people marry. What are you afraid of—life?'

'I'm sorry you should think I'm so desperate.'

'I'm sorry I wasted Milady's valuable time.'

They stared away from each other, angry and upset. Diana looked at the quiet shops and cinema queues: at young couples in their Sunday clothes, dawdling and laughing and appearing to enjoy themselves vastly. One part of her felt angry for not being able to love Rodney, and the other sick at the idea of a man she couldn't bear offering her what she so much wanted. She was honest enough to know that if Rodney had had enough personality, she wouldn't have bothered about his background at all. Snobbery flourishes only where love has failed to bloom. But she tried to feel grateful for Rodney, all the same. And then she thought of Alice. Rodney would expect Alices of his own. And Mum, who was a sort of Mrs. Bates, would live with them.

Oh, it was tantalising, though! She was sick of living alone with Alice. And there was no job she wouldn't do, no circumstances she wouldn't face, for the right man. To have a home again, a 'place in the community, a man of her own, a future. . . . Kinder not to see Rodney again, she decided.

In part, he divined her thoughts. 'Got another fellow?'

'No.' To herself she added, not yet. Hope, like memory, was paralysing Diana's life. There must be somebody . . . somewhere. . . . To-morrow, or next year, she'd find them, and life would be wonderful again. Rodney had shown her she was desirable, marriageable. It was only a question of waiting. Yes, she'd be wise to wait. Stupid to accept Rodney in a panic, and ruin her life and his.

Strong in her decision, she turned brilliant blue eyes to him, and his traitor heart began to work like a pumping station. The more he scowled, the harder it worked. 'Good-bye,' she breathed, and reached for his hand.

But Rodney, spurned, marched stiffly home to Mum's, and caught earlier buses after that.

Diana walked home alone, along dusty, sun-hot pavements. She felt disturbed and unhappy. Life between the Goldbergs and Mrs. Bates and Alice was no life at all for a healthy young woman, as Rodney said. But she loathed the idea of adventures, and she never met anybody.

A car drew up at the kerb as Diana passed, and a young girl scrambled out, a girl not very different from herself. Diana remembered white shoes, unpinned black hair, a gold band on her finger. And her voice. 'I do hope she'll be all right, left on her own. Come on, Tim——'

Diana glanced at this other Tim. A fresh-faced young man, thirtyish, with leather elbows to his jacket. At the elderly, well-polished car he drove. The intimacy of the couple brought home to her her own loss. There, but for the gods of war, go Tim and I!

Only it wasn't really Tim she wanted, any more. Poor eager, junior, fire-eating Tim, hero or victim—it depended how cynical one was feeling. Her Tim was gone, remembered in her mind as a youth for ever, like Peter Pan. She'd had to grow on and up without him. She wanted a companion of her own age, now.

The lamp-posts stood *garde à vous* as she marched past them, head high and heart bleeding. 'My God, if only Rodney had a bit more polish, and less Mum.'

When she got home, Alice had spent the shilling on candyfloss, and been sick.

When (looking back, she supposed it was inevitable) Mr. Goldberg finally got her alone in the stockroom and made a pass at her, Diana reached down and slapped his eager, olive face. The noise surprised both of them. Mr. Gold-

berg reeled backwards into a rack of shiny cocktail suits, which parted obligingly to let him through. Patsy, the red-haired third sales, glancing in to inquire whether we had any black dinner gowns in a forty-four-inch hip, took in the scene in a flash and backed out. Mr. Goldberg got off the floor. Diana, white as a stone, stood with the rush order book she'd been consulting. Her employer avoided her eyes. Whatever jolt it was to his person, it was a worse one to his ego. 'Leah!' he wailed. 'Leah.'

Mrs. Goldberg appeared, understood almost as rapidly as Patsy, and advanced on Diana.

'You—you take your things and go! Your cards . . . your money . . . here. No reference we give. Nuddings.' She swept her husband behind a velvet curtain, like a gown to be fixed when the customer has gone. Her instinct was to scream at Diana exactly what she thought of her, but her business experience warned her it would scare away the lady with the forty-four-inch hips. So she hissed, instead. 'I am watching you a long time—so. Always running after men. I know your kind. Get out.'

Diana Monroe, the doctor's daughter, would have been speechless at such a vicious and unjustified attack. Diana Kimmidge, the girl who had to fight for everything she had, was tougher. 'Dirty old so-and-so!' Her face was white, but her heart was pounding. 'Not that I blame him over-much, sfuck with you. It'd drive any man to paw a salesgirl. I'm leaving because I wish to leave, and I'll take a month's pay and a reference.'

'Nuddings. I call the police——'

'A month's pay. That's twenty pounds, and I'd have doubled it with commission. And don't forget to put I was First Sales. If you don't—I'll scream and empty the shop!'

But Mrs. Goldberg was already unlocking a drawer.

Sixty seconds later, Diana was outside in the free air of Knightsbridge, with twenty one-pound notes bulging in her handbag, and a reference promised. For about ten minutes she felt deliriously happy, walking on air, a

thousand hopes and projects in her mind. Then she sobered up. She couldn't afford an unplanned holiday. There was Alice to consider. But she was through with clothes for the time being. She might get a hotel assistant's job, in the country. . . . Or perhaps receptionist at a club, or an airline.

A barrel organ was playing in a side-street. 'Lily of Laguna'! The tune Mrs. Bates always said reminded her of 'you and your little girl' though she couldn't tell why. Diana had come to think of it as her signature tune. She gave the man a shilling. She felt she needed all the luck she could buy.

A week later, she'd had three interviews, but no job. Her handbag no longer bulged conspicuously. It was then that she remembered Rodney Harmer talking about his directors taking a party of visitors to a club in Earls Court called the Band Box. Rodney had been at his most left-wing. 'Spent enough on champagne to keep a working-class family for a month. And then the owner, some damn foreigner, had the cheek to blame the bad service on a lack of staff.'

The A-D section of the London telephone directory told her that the Band Box was in Falcon Street, S.W. It was a discreet entry in small type.

Next day Diana took a bus to Earls Court and inquired for Falcon Street. It was a characterless by-way between a large pub called the Falcon Arms and a car park on a bombed site, which was even larger. Diana went into the lounge of the pub, which was nearly empty at that morning hour, and ordered a gin. Then she asked the barman over-casually if he knew the Band Box. Long ago, Mrs. Monroe had warned Diana of the dreadful things that happened in night-clubs, and the training lingered.

'Want Mr. Atreverso?' asked the barman, wondering why on earth a girl with Diana's looks was unaccompanied, and incidentally telling her whom to ask for. 'He'll be going out to lunch soon. The first door down the area. Better hurry.'

The Band Box turned out to be a fairly high-class night spot, and perfectly respectable. With skilful lighting, it looked intimate and exciting, and at daytime it had the garishness of an Egyptian tomb, without the dignity. Mr. Atreverso, the owner, had a windowless cage of an office, and apparently lived in it.

Diana caught up with him just as he was about to lock the premises, and boldly asked him for a job.

He looked her over appreciatively, but he said, 'Sorry, dear. No singers here.'

Diana stood her ground. 'I don't sing.' She was trying to decide his nationality. Middle East, probably, but carried a British passport. He was quite young, but soft and over-plump. He had the hard little eyes of a pig, but his manner was courteous.

'A secretary I do not need. In the hat-check, I have already someone.' He oozed apology as if he meant it.

'I'm not a cloakroom attendant.'

'Then what do you want? To sell cigarettes, maybe?'

'Yes.' Diana risked it. It sounded nice and clean, anyway. And in her experience, people avoided buying cigarettes in night-clubs like the plague.

'Ha. You have good legs, yes?'

Diana looked at him in disgust, and made to sweep out.

'Because, dear, you stand on them many hours here.' He gave her a sudden white-and-gold smile, and Diana felt uncomfortable. He added bluntly that the pay was skeletal, and it was up to her to make herself tips.

The Band Box was an old air-raid shelter, converted as cheaply as possible. Its dance floor was the size of a tablecloth, and it had four enormous pillars, necessary in former days, and now painted with Mediterranean scenes which may, or may not, have had some meaning for the owner. The staff was polyglot and, in the main, discontented. The three-piece band simply didn't bother, unless somebody sent them drinks, when they bounded about like dervishes, working up a fresh thirst. The food was poor. There were

several highly spiced dishes, which the regulars avoided, ordering vin rosé, omelet and coffee, which were the best things there, and the cheapest.

Diana's first night was a nightmare, and she was ready to throw up the job by morning. The atmosphere choked her, and she was genuinely embarrassed at exposing her legs and her midriff. She stuck it out of obstinacy, rather than reasoning. The tips were good, and she had nothing else.

She was ashamed of her new job, at first. 'I'm a shift worker . . . night shift,' she told Mrs. Bates, to whom she had to entrust Alice.

Mrs. Bates found out from Alice exactly what Diana did, and where, and was quite thrilled. 'Well, now. I always said you were too pretty!' She didn't explain what she meant.

Diana insisted that she was neither required to dance, nor sit with the customers, nor sup in a private room. 'There's no difference between me and the lady who sells ices in the cinema,' she told Alice.

'Oh, yes there is——' Alice had recently become a film fan and never missed a performance if she could wangle the entrance from her mother. 'She's got glasses on, like me.'

For six nights a week Diana, all bows and bareness, with black silk stockings—the thigh-length ones that she'd always thought of as wicked—stalked about the Band Box with her cigarette tray, looking curvaceous and genteel at the same time, and longed for morning.

She hadn't been there a month, when Vivian Carter walked in.

Of course, she didn't know who he was, then. Just someone with money to burn, who was given the best table and greeted personally by Mr. Atreverso and the head waiter, and for whom the band were eager to play. He brought a superb young blonde with a good load of gin

aboard already. She didn't try to talk. She sat smiling vacantly at no one. After a while she leaned against a pillar and closed her eyes.

Diana remembered the man chiefly by his attitude—a sort of colossal arrogance which no one but herself seemed to resent. He was tall, perhaps in his late forties (the pink lamps were kind), thin and exquisitely tailored and at ease, as if no one could doubt his right to waste money and give orders and bring a lovely young girl (who might have been his daughter and obviously wasn't, and who ought to have been in bed hours ago, as the waiter confided to Diana). Having brought her, he ignored her completely, like a gold-topped cane left in the hallstand till its owner remembers it. Like a chattel, Diana thought, watching the barman prepare the girl's glass. (The rim dipped in gin, and a tablespoonful of cold water inside. The barman made a lot of money for his employer late at night. Diana wondered idly what rake-off he got.) From time to time the girl sipped unsuspectingly.

Meanwhile, Carter chatted to Atreverso, and Diana stationed within earshot gathered he was a favourite client who'd been out of town and was hungry for gossip and news of acquaintances. Atreverso supplied what he could, and when he could supply no more, suggested wine. He served it himself, which was an enormous mark of his favour.

Distinguished, Diana decided grudgingly, shifting her weight from one aching foot to the other. Army officer, perhaps. Probably married and separated. Plenty of money. Spoilt.

Her own meeting with him was very brief. Suddenly he clicked his fingers in her direction (she almost expected him to clap his hands) and asked for a certain brand of cigarettes. He glanced at her legs, and told her to keep the change. The blonde opened her eyes, and disappeared to the cloakroom for a long time. Atreverso immediately scuttled back—as if Carter were a VIP who mustn't be left to get bored for a moment—and Carter chatted to

him, and to the man at the next table, till his blonde returned.

When they left, Diana saw him move stiffly, and remembered that he hadn't danced. But whether that was his wish, or his partner's condition, she didn't think. She had the curiosity to ask Giorgio, the waiter, whether he was anyone special.

'He'—Giorgio flourished a limp napkin towards the empty table—'was the Captain Carter.'

Diana grinned, amused at her own mistake. 'Only a captain? I imagined he was a general, at least.'

Gloria, in the hat-check, was more communicative. 'First war, ducks. Got a gong, too. Limps—but that doesn't seem to cramp his style. Men! They never know when they're old.' She licked a finger and ran it over her eyebrow. 'Four o'clock in the morning, again. Do I look a hag at this hour?' She reached for a mass of pink knitting, and smiled pityingly at Diana. 'At least I can put my feet up, here.'

Vivian Carter came again to the Band Box, at irregular intervals, and brought a different girl each time. A different girl, but the same type. Young, dumb and adoring. He bought them anything they fancied—drinks, flowers, absurd dolls, liqueur chocolates. Diana was often able to salvage dolls and chocolates for Alice, in the morning. She served Carter many times, and he hardly seemed to look at her.

'Get me some matches, will you?' He let his girl's dance with any man who offered, watching them woe-fully and beating time with his long strong fingers on the table-cloth. Diana wondered why he bothered to bring a girl to partner someone else. He was writing when she came to his table, and didn't raise his head. 'Matches, please.'

Diana put down a book of matches with a crude drawing of a Band Box on the flap. She was supposed to hand in five shillings a dozen for them. Anything over five, she kept for herself. It took a long time to sell a

dozen, and some customers objected to paying at all for them.

'Thanks. Tell me—just for the record—what's an educated girl like you doing in a place like this?'

It was a question occasionally put to Diana, and she hated it. She wasn't 'educated' as Rodney Harmer had shown her, when she matched her mind with his. She merely clung to an accent and manner that made her something of a misfit in the jobs she took. The other cigarette-girl, Lucy, made more money than she did by relaxing cheerfully with all-comers. She was particularly tired to-night, and she wasn't interested in flirting with a man who completed his appearance with a beautiful woman, like a last-minute buttonhole.

'It's a job—like any other. And I've got a child to keep.'

'One?'

'Yes.'

'Legitimate?'

'Of course. I'm a war widow. If that concerns you.' Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Atreverso watching her. The jerk of her head revealed that she was scarcely encouraging his best customer. Lucy, always jealous of her, passed behind her with an audible sniff.

'M'm. You're probably the prettiest woman in the room—or you could be if you had some competitive clothing on. How old are you?'

'The matches are sixpence, please.'

'The answer I might have expected.' He wasn't annoyed at all. It even made him glance at her, and his face at close quarters was a shock. It was haggard, drawn. She wondered if his leg could be paining him, but he went on evenly. 'I suppose your spare time's fully occupied?'

'Yes. It is.'

'Good. Women too easily available bore me—any man can have them. That's what's wrong with Mickey.' He nodded his head, not at Diana, but at his latest girl shuffling round the floor with her partner.

Diana echoed the name stupidly. Her head was aching, and her absurd dress of red-and-white taffeta chafed her limbs when she moved. The air was thick with smoke and perfume and the steam of food. The band was playing a rhumba, cheating with the time, since the couples were making a slow foxtrot of it. And I used to be such an outdoor girl! she remembered suddenly. At ten, I won a prize for the high jump. Poor old Midge couldn't—she's too heavy. Heavens, I wish I was in bed beside her, right now. What an idiot man. . . . 'Oh, the matches are sixpence, please.'

'Very well. You're rather rude, you know. However . . .' He felt in his pocket, handed her a coin and the card he'd written and dismissed her, just as Mickey returned to him. Diana was so surprised, she accepted the card.

Mr. Atreverso spoke to her curtly, sending her across the room on an errand, and she tucked the card behind the cigars on her tray. Superbos de Cuba never sold, anyway, and she kept change and a few pins in the box. She didn't read the card till she was in the comparative privacy of the kitchen, where Giorgio was counting his silver and the chef cleaning his nails. The card was engraved, not printed:

VIVIAN CARTER

No address. No occupation. Nothing.

How like the man's gigantic cheek, she thought. What does he think his name conveys to me? She turned it over. On the back, Vivian had scribbled '12.30 Wednesday, at the Titanique, for lunch'.

Her own curiosity defeated her, and she went.

She had two shocks, that Wednesday. The restaurant was far smarter than anywhere she'd ever been taken, or could dress for, and Vivian Carter, in daylight, was middle-aged.

Diana wore tailored black, the best suit in her small wardrobe, but she hadn't bothered about a hat. Her thick

black hair framed her face and hung, half curling on her shoulders, in the little-girl way she'd always worn it. It made her look younger, and vulnerable, even if it didn't suit the occasion. She had no jewellery. Her handbag was shabby and looked full of junk, which it was. Her scarlet finger-tips glowed through gauzy summer gloves. She arrived late and breathless (she never got up to lunch, normally), half expecting to find no Vivian, and alarmed to see him waiting, and escape cut off.

He rose to greet her. 'How nice of you to come.'

Diana struggled with two emotions: dismay at her own appearance, and suspicion that he dyed his hair. 'Well . . . it was nice of you to suggest it.'

He indicated that they should sit down. 'What will you drink?' And when she hesitated, he was quick to help her. 'Sherry? Martini? Dubonnet?'

His officiousness cleared Diana's mind for her. She drew off last year's gloves and glanced round at the well-dressed diners, settling herself elegantly in her chair. 'No, thank you. I'll have gin and tonic.'

They sipped their drinks, assessing each other covertly behind polite, blank faces, making talk.

'I don't think I caught your surname, Mrs.——?'

'Kimmidge. Diana Kimmidge. No, I didn't tell you my name at all. You didn't ask.'

He nodded, dismissing the subject. He had an unsmiling, rather cavernous face that would photograph well, Diana decided, like an actor's. . . . If only it were more mobile, he'd make quite a good actor . . . because he gives the impression his every gesture is an act. Or else it isn't—and he can't help it. Naturally, she wondered what he thought of her. And then, if he was thinking of her at all. For the silence between them lengthened, and he scanned every new arrival with interest. It was hardly flattering to Diana. She waited politely, however, examining the other women's clothes. So this was the fashionable Titanique, where everybody who was somebody managed to be seen——.

'Mrs. Kimmidge——' His voice, at last, quite startled her. He was saying a set piece which, like his gestures, seemed to have been rehearsed beforehand. 'To obviate any ideas that I'm a mysterious character, and to save you making the usual oblique inquiries, may I give you a brief biography of myself? Thank you. My grandfather was a workman with certain new ideas about the processing of steel. He rose to found a small firm, and left his ideas to my father to carry on. My father had no ideas about steel, but plenty about business. He made a good deal of money, was given a charity knighthood, and sent me to the right schools. I know nothing about steel, or business. I am merely a shareholder in my own company. I have the right contacts, socially. . . . In fact, you will gather that I had what is known as a gilded youth—sport and spending money, and not too much paperwork. I was thinking of entering the Diplomatic Corps when the war broke out, and sent me into the Guards, instead. After the Armistice, I resigned my commission. Military life has its amusements, but it hardly satisfied an individualist like myself. Indeed, military life in peacetime has always struck me as an anachronism. . . . My chief interest for many years was motor racing. I used to drive. I believe I am not unknown. . . . My wife has divorced me, and I live in a service flat. I have a son, my heir. I trust he will one day rise to a key position in Carter Foundries. . . . I can judge wine, and engines, and women's clothes. And if I may be so personal, I think you should have worn a hat to lunch here!'

'Well . . . that's frank at least.' Diana was too astounded to be angry. Now that she knew, she told herself that was exactly what she'd expected of Vivian Carter. It is always pleasant to have one's judgment confirmed. She thought, Heavens, isn't he pleased with himself? And then, He must be brave, too. He didn't say anything about being wounded and decorated. Perhaps he just likes impressing strange young women. . . . She smiled across her glass. 'And if I, too, may be personal, what was

your reason for inviting me here? Not to find out whether I own a hat, surely?'

Carter stared at the whisky in his glass, raised it to her, and drank it off. 'Curiosity, my dear Diana. And why did you come? Curiosity, again. Now that we're quits, shall we lunch?'

They stood up, and a waiter hurried forward. 'You're tall,' Carter told her. He sounded really pleased. 'What an elegant couple we make.' She followed the waiter, and her companion limped behind. Heads turned at their entrance.

Diana had a horrid moment. I wonder if he brings—the others—here?

The lunch was the first of many, and it seemed to Diana that she and Vivian Carter were moving about a chess-board in an elegant game which they both knew too well to cheat at. Neither was prepared to force the pace of their unfolding acquaintance. Diana was delighted. Conditioned in a hard school, she was still somewhat unpractised, and like many women, she found the initial stages of their relationship the sweetest. Vivian talked fluently, even longwindedly, about the many people and events in his life. He'd taken part in so much, he could hardly fail to be interesting. But it was always a personal picture—what Vivian Carter felt and saw and noticed. Not what the Queen wore, or the Governor said, or what the uniforms were, or the weather.

Diana listened and laughed and encouraged. Registered amazement, horror or respect. If she didn't really feel it so strongly, she did feel that she owed it, and Vivian awaited her reaction so hungrily, it would have been boorish not to applaud.

Sometimes (she realised only later he was testing her) they went to a picture gallery for an hour, or a concert.

Vivian knew little about pictures, except superficially. He'd heard of lots of painters. He'd heard of various schools. He really knew a man who'd given £3,000 for

an early Van Gogh, though he only recognised that painter's work when it had Vincent in the corner.

Diana's approach was at least genuine. She looked at a Dutch interior and said, 'What a lovely clean floor. As good as linoleum, isn't it?' Then she thought one painted face was sad, and another spoilt by the hair-style.

'You don't know much about painting, do you?' He mightn't have been so pleased if she had, and had queried his own knowledge. And it was an unreasonable question to ask a pretty girl he'd met selling cigarettes in a club, anyway.

'No. . . .' Something warned her not to say, But I know what I like! 'Tell me what I ought to look for?'

But that was much too direct, and Vivian changed the subject at once.

He knew nothing at all about music, though he was fond of it. Diana, on the other hand, was only aware of the extreme hardness of her chair, and how much she wanted a cigarette. It ended at last, and they moved stiffly out into the sunshine.

'Hideous place.' Vivian looked back at the Albert Hall. The music, and Diana's obvious ignorance of it, had put him in a good mood. 'You can smoke now.' He passed his case.

'Thank you. . . .' Diana looked back at the building. 'It reminds me of a pot-pourri jar of my mother's. Upside down, of course.' She gave him a lovely smile, and for hand. 'I must get that bus, if you'll excuse me. I like to see my daughter in daylight, you know.'

She climbed to the upper deck of the bus, humming to herself. Not a theme from the concerto she'd just heard, but a tango they played in the Band Box every night. There were moments when Vivian and his stories went a long way—it was such a strain, always appreciating them. He must never be laughed at. He couldn't even laugh with her, having no sense of fun. She admired him, and she liked him because he was always correct. She expected

nothing at all from him—except, eventually, to be dropped for a newer audience.

~~She never~~ She ~~never~~ thought about love.

Naturally, she bought a hat early in their acquaintance—and left it in the cloakroom. It was something he'd expect, and she wanted to show him she wasn't so easily influenced. But she took infinite trouble with her face and clothes.

'How old's this daughter of yours?' he asked her once.

'Ten. How old's your son?'

'Oh, older . . . older. No, really! I didn't think you had a daughter as big as that.' He looked so disconcerted that Diana burst out laughing.

'Well, I'm twenty-nine, now. I was married at eighteen. These things happen quickly in war-time.'

'Ah yes . . . the war.'

She realised that 'the war' meant the first war for him, and the second for her. His war was the war they reproduced occasionally in films, a war of mud and trenches and leaves spent in Paris. She knew now (though not from Vivian) that he'd been wounded in a gallant and impossible attempt to save a life. It crossed her mind to wonder how he'd spent 'her' war. In defence, possibly? But the captains of the first war were the colonels of the second. She felt curiously shy of asking.

Occasionally, they ran into his friends, and Vivian always introduced her, for his manners bordered on formality. It made her wonder if Mickey and her predecessors had been introduced, and she supposed they had been, and the friends didn't bother to retain the names of Vivian's women. She speculated about Mickey. Did Vivian keep her, or had he merely picked her up?

Mr. Atreverso at the Band Box said to her once, 'Captain Carter no come no more. You don't talk him so nice, maybe he don't like it here now. You no good for my business, you.'

Diana shrugged. She concluded someone had seen her

out with Vivian and reported it. Mr. Atreverso, with his April-changes of anger and kindness, was becoming a bore.

'Maybe his girl-friend doesn't like it here—maybe she likes somewhere smarter!' She reckoned to be finished with the Band Box by Christmas. With the reference the Goldbergs had been forced to give her, she could get a sales job in any of the West End stores. She might work up to be a buyer—she was still young enough for that. And it would be nice to have more time with Alice, more daytime. At the moment poor Alice slept alone (with Mrs. Bates promising to listen out for her), breakfasted with the landlady and went out to school alone. Diana came home tired out, tidied the room and rolled into the bed Alice had vacated. She slept till early afternoon, and they only met for tea. Sometimes she worried herself sick about leaving Alice. The plainer looking Alice grew, the warmer and more protective were Diana's feelings towards her.

'Oh, Mummy—you do fuss. I'm all right. Honestly I'm all right,' insisted Alice, for whom the glamour of a mother in a night-club (it was commonly believed in school that she sang) did much to balance the ugliness of pig-tails and thick lenses. 'Besides, what could happen to me in the house at night?'

Diana was caught. She hoped, of course, that nothing would happen, and she didn't want to make the child nervous suggesting things that could. 'How would you like to wear out my green wedge shoes for me—your foot's only half a size smaller than mine?'

Alice was happily side-tracked and the question sank.

Vivian kept away from the Band Box, and continued to take her out to lunch. He maintained his interest in her, even to the extent of deploring his other women in her presence. ('I've always been a fool over women. You must have seen those girls didn't mean a thing to me—mere table decoration') That gave rise to the suspicion that he might discuss her in turn. She became guarded

with Vivian and remembering his remark about 'available women boring him' took care to refuse him occasionally, and took Alice to a Corner House instead. Another thing, she had trouble in adapting her small wardrobe to the sort of places Vivian chose.

Vivian insisted on meeting Alice. Mrs. Bates was impressed with his car, and curtains twitched in all the windows when it parked outside. Diana was ashamed of the house, of the smell of cats and cooking, and the newspapers blowing against the railings. Alice, infected with her mother's nervousness, anxious to please, and not sure how to, was stricken dumb and sat, wedged like a suet pudding in her chair, holding her breath, and longing to escape to Mrs. Bates and the life she understood.

Fortunately, the visit didn't last long. Vivian refused tea and never spoke to Alice at all, beyond How d'you do and Good-bye. A crowd of small children had appeared from nowhere to admire his car, and scattered at his return. Diana was convinced that the visit was the end of their acquaintance. She tried to be philosophical about it

'Well, darling, that was the famous Vivian. What did you think of him?'

But Alice was quite incapable of giving a nutshell opinion. It wasn't for her to like or dislike a person so obviously important. Her mother had said very little to her about Vivian so far. Suddenly Alice began to whimper 'Oh, Di, I thought he was just a Rodney and he's a VIP. He's vippier than anyone I've ever seen.'

Diana told her not to be a sausage: there was nothing to be frightened about. Nevertheless, a new phrase came into Alice's life, to describe any great stupidity or clumsiness. 'Now, whatever would Vivian think?' Young Alice set out to please Vivian Carter, without wondering why, or where it might lead.

Diana was invited to lunch the next day, and Vivian seemed kinder and more understanding than usual. He questioned her closely about her home, her life with Alice, her likes and interests. He approved her treatment of the

Goldbergs, and of Rodney ('Not your type at all, my dear'), her tightly maintained respectability, her desire for a home. He darted in such questions as, 'How would you like to run a house—a large one?' and 'Do you keep up with papers? Fiction? Films? Everyone needs the small change of conversation', till she wondered if he was going to offer her a job, or start improving her mind himself.

Back in her room, preparing to go out to the club, with Alice in pyjamas dancing on the bed, the Kerensky's radio competing with the Indian's baby, Diana examined the idea that had occasionally nibbled at the threshold of her mind, and always been swept out as ridiculous. Instead of being admirable, and 'difficult' and a bit of a bore . . . Vivian Carter regarded her seriously. He might even want to marry her.

For lack of another confidante, she talked to Alice about Vivian, and how she'd begun to hope.

She was disconcerted when Alice rushed home from school every day, and shouted 'Any luck?' but in fairness, she blamed only herself.

In the first, the qualifying place, Alice learned that Vivian was a gentleman, 'their' sort of person. To her intense surprise, she learned that her mother had a 'background'.

'What is a background, Mummy?' Alice could only think of the painting class at school, where you began by filling in the background, and the page got wet and curly and all too soon you'd blotted it with your sleeve.

'Well . . . it's the tastes you have—the values, at least—and what you'd been used to. Where you went to school, and what your father did.' Diana wanted to avoid the word 'class' and could think of nothing else. 'If your Daddy had lived, your background would have been very different.'

'How?'

'Well, you'd have had a home, for one thing.'

Alice looked round the only home she knew, which was not now, it seemed, a home at all. She sighed with in-

ability to understand. The tall, the somehow terrifying Vivian had started all this. 'I'd rather have a playground than a background.' In their crowded streets, it was a sore point. She looked at the youth in the photograph, with his dusty smile and hunched shoulder. 'Would Daddy mind?'

'He wouldn't know.' It was her own belief, anyway. School and the Salvation Army were welcome to persuade the child otherwise—if they could.

'Yes, he would. The ionized zones . . . I expect he'd get a pinging note.' She opened the window, dragged the landlady's cat into the room, kissed it affectionately, and let it through. 'It hasn't got fleas—so there!'

Her mother went on happily. Vivian could give her a background . . . send her to a 'proper' school. . . . When she was older, she would have clothes, meet the 'right' people. . . . For weeks after his visit, Diana confided daily to her daughter 'Heavens! If only he'd propose.'

Young Alice, hurrying home from school (but not, alas, a 'proper' school), her fingers inky and her stomach rumbling for tea, always inquired for results. Since her mother wanted the proposal so much, she wanted it, too. More confident than Diana, she expected it every day. 'Gosh . . . it'll be my birthday, soon. It'll be school next week. . . . Blackie's kittens will be here first, at this rate.'

The room was always in confusion at this hour. Diana was generally half-dressed, dawdling over her hair-brushing or painting her nails. Her job at the club started at eight, and finished with the milkman. She was used to that long morning walk in a half-world of shadows. She was seldom late enough for a bus, or opulent enough to afford a taxi. She hadn't seen Vivian for days. 'God knows what's going to happen, Midge.'

'God——' Naturally, Alice copied her mother's speech —'He'd damn well better hurry up, then.'

Diana looked startled. 'Don't say God and Damn in front of Vivian——'

'All right, but you do. . . . Look, Di, those Poles upstairs have pinched our milk again. And I need one and three for teacher's birthday flowers. And there's a hole in my knickers. . . . Can I go out and play hopscotch after tea?'

Diana abandoned her rôle of contemporary, and slipped on that of correcting parent, like another gown. 'You're to remember to call me Mummy,' she told the child. 'And put my bag down—I didn't say you could open it.' Poor, plain Alice that she loved so dearly had always been the stumbling-block to remarriage in the past. Would it still be so? Had Vivian disliked the child? If he really did, she couldn't marry him. . . . Or had he wanted to see what sort of a mother she was? Mrs. Bates made a point of mentioning him, whenever she saw her tenant. . . . She put down her hairbrush with a clatter, and coloured a generous mouth grown petulant. The mirror gave her back her white, unsmiling face and set her peering for tiny lines and slackness in her long, thin neck. Since Vivian had decided she didn't look more than twenty-five, she'd begun to worry in case one day, she did. 'Oh, can't you sew yet? Do learn. If all you kids take money, she'll have enough for a wreath. . . .' She pushed a cigarette into her fresh-drawn mouth and bent to the match which Alice had ready. 'Thanks, Midge. Oh, do stop mucking about with my nail varnish.'

'Mummy, we can't afford cigarettes in twenties.' Sometimes talk like that made her mother laugh. Anything rather than a black mood, when there were only two of them shoulder to shoulder—or rather, Alice's shoulder to Diana's waist—against a hostile world.

'Bonus, darling. A customer left them on his table.' Abandoned cigarettes, like the untouched chocolates, were a sort of windfall to the club personnel.

'Was he stinko?' inquired Alice, with interest. Nobody in their senses left cigarettes behind in twenties.

'Tight as a newt! Look here, Alice, there are certain words . . . and certain things . . . you're not supposed

to know yet. I know it's difficult, and I can't explain, but please try and remember——'

'All right, Di. I mean—Mummy. I won't know them if Vivian comes here again. Not until you've hooked him, anyway.' Alice had guessed the problem with embarrassing accuracy. 'Now may I go and play hopscotch? Oh, hell, my knickers——'

But Diana shrugged good humouredly and reached for a needle. 'Hold still, wriggler.'

Vivian would not have been flattered if he'd known his every mood and move was shared with a little girl of ten whom he'd ungraciously nicknamed Turnip.

CHAPTER III

AND then Vivian did ask her to marry him. He'd rushed her off to the Motor Show (without consulting her preferences), excited as a child to whom a birthday brings a promised toy. Outside, the sun was a red ball in the October sky, and inside, the noise, the lights and the champagne she'd drunk at lunch were combining to make Diana a very sleepy and uncritical companion. She knew nothing about cars. Couldn't even drive one (her father had died just when she was old enough to learn). The only car Alice had ever been in was a taxi. A car had been as much out of her reach as a luxury yacht or a space ship.

Vivian, on the other hand, moved from stand to stand in a sort of royal progress, recognised and greeted, his early racing triumphs recalled—or at least mugged up.

The excitement made him look ten years younger, happier, more human. Diana was pleased that he was pleased: she was puzzled, too. How old was Vivian? When someone remembered the King handing him a trophy, which King did they mean? An old man in a double-breasted suit slapped Vivian affectionately and called him, 'The grandfather of British motor racing.'

Vivian's face darkened a little, then. 'I'm afraid I can't claim that. But I would like to be considered as a godfather.' Diana gathered that he, in turn, had presented a trophy.

He'd taken her arm to steer her through the crowd, and suddenly he noticed her lack of response. 'I suppose all this bores you?'

'Not at all. Not when I'm taken on a guided tour of the high spots.' She managed a smile. 'I'd probably get lost alone. I didn't realise you were famous, Vivian.'

Vivian looked pleased, but he said, 'Oh, I'm only an amateur, really. Times have changed. The necessary calculations are beyond me, for one thing.'

'Poor old Midge can't do sums, either,' she comforted him. 'It's her stumbling-block——'

'Diana, will you be my wife?'

She stopped, speechless at the fortune offered at last, too excited to think. She felt enormously, genuinely grateful. It was the first time she had been really touched by Vivian—there was nothing touching in a rich man buying her lunch. Till now, he had shown himself just a casual, sophisticated companion, and she had tried to match his mood. It wasn't love that she'd discussed so anxiously with Alice, it was their need for security. She hadn't felt an adult should talk about love to a child, whereas having and not having were tangible conditions, and Alice wasn't blind. Had *she* perhaps been blind to Vivian's changing feelings? She stared at the bright parts of an engine, miraculously bisected to show the workings. Around them was noise and echo, cigarette smoke, the loudspeakers announcing something, people pushing. It was even less romantic than poor old Tim's proposal on Victoria station. Even less credible.

'But, Vivian . . . you have everything. Are you sure?'

'Why shouldn't I be sure? Don't you think I've watched you, all these weeks I've known you——?'

'Yes. But——' She only wanted him to repeat his words, not sow doubts in his mind.

'I want your youth, your brightness, your vitality,' Vivian told her greedily. 'I want your laughter, your appetites, and the way you seize on my ideas whole, like a sea anemone. Oh, Diana . . . I'm sick of being alone.' He didn't mention love. He didn't actually mention money. 'Don't worry about your infant. I'll cope.'

It was Rodney Harmer who'd also offered to cope, she remembered. Poor little girl, if she could only have been welcomed, instead of coped with. She said, her excite-

ment fading, 'I'd have to be quite sure Alice would be happy.'

'Why on earth shouldn't Alice be happy? Am I an ogre, or something? Doesn't she want to get away from that doss-house of yours?'

'Of course. Of course. . . . Oh, Vivian—I will make you happy. I really will.'

He released her arm, then. 'Happiness and hell are things we make ourselves,' he told her drily. 'Depending on our particular alchemy. I'd rather you were happy. I like to watch you being happy.'

'Indeed I am, with you.'

He ignored that. 'I like the way you bury your face in my flowers—you don't just sniff them politely, you enjoy them. You get a kick out of going to a new restaurant or driving about in my car—a visible kick. I like to watch that, too.'

'You mean—you like me?' It was the nearest she could ask.

'I'm telling you the *things* I like, my dear. Your independence is one. How many other women in London would have preferred an afternoon on a Thames steamer with a small child to a run to the coast in my car? Your slangy talk's another—in the right place, mind—and I like the way you look upwards when you come out of a building, as if you expected the sun to shine! You aren't bothered with doubts and gloom and self-analysis. You're young. You're so alive you almost bounce!'

He wasn't entirely right about her, and she knew it, even then. Of course she was miserable and envious at times—as Alice could have told him—but his interest in her had kept her mentally on her toes. When they were together, anyway.

'Luxury is your element, like a cat's. I promise you luxury till you purr, Diana. Don't look dismayed, now. It's all right. I'm very fond of cats.'

She didn't know what to answer. A memory of Mickey: of Christy the Hungarian girl: of the redhead before her,

brought by Vivian to the Band Box, obtruded tactlessly. They, too, were cats, in Vivian's reckoning.

'Well, I'm broke now,' she parried, 'you've seen where I live, and I never pretended otherwise, but my home was quite different'—she didn't want him to think his offer of luxury influenced her—'I was an only child. Daddy adored me. I learned the violin——'

To her consternation, Vivian burst out laughing. 'Wonderful!' he cried. 'The violin. The acme of culture. I bet you hated it.' She wanted to deny it, and remembered the afternoon at the Albert Hall. Vivian had seen then what her father had taken ten years to find out, that she simply wasn't musical.

The laughter left his mouth—it had never been in his eyes—and he looked at her hungrily with an expression she couldn't understand.

'I expect you don't appreciate things so much because you've always had them.' She tried to make her voice sound light.

'I don't know.' He sounded gloomy, now. 'I haven't got much gift of appreciation. I never worked and achieved things like my grandfather, and I grew up in the shadow of my father's ability.' Obviously, Vivian had no objection to analysing himself. 'I lacked incentives,' he decided.

Diana smiled encouragingly, but Vivian was already far away with his private memories, recalled perhaps by the motor salesman. Her own childhood was so precious (after all, it had to do for Alice as well) that she respected this. But Vivian's attention was next engaged by the cut-away engine, and he peered into it, muttering. The conversation was apparently shelved for the moment, and there were dozens of questions she wanted to ask. She would have been grateful for more personal data. Where were they going to live? Was Vivian intending to purchase a house on his marriage? (This was important, from Alice's point of view.) Did he support his former wife, or share the custody of the son? Perhaps she'd find herself acting as stepmother for a part of the year. She wondered very

much about the boy. Older than Alice? In his teens, probably. He might make a nice companion for her. She supposed he lived with his mother. She knew Vivian had been divorced some time.

Vivian turned down a passage that was, by comparison, quiet. There was a row of fire buckets along the wall, a catalogue already trampled on, a palm whose pot had suffered. Diana stumbled after him, not realising that he was only taking a short cut back to the main hall. She'd thought he might be going to take her into his arms, and her heart missed a beat. Every engagement that she'd ever heard of had been sealed with a kiss. Only a fastidious person like Vivian would hardly kiss her here, where any of the salesmen might see. Beside them, a typist was hammering in the office portion of a stand, and an announcement she hadn't listened to was greeted with handclapping.

'I'm glad young Ackerman's got it,' Vivian remarked pleasantly. 'I've watched him come up.'

'What?' Her dreams, finer than a skein of glass, shivered into a thousand splinters. 'What?'

'Ackerman's won the Grand Prix.' Vivian nodded at the loudspeaker nearly over his head. 'I was at his sister's wedding last month. He was in hospital. Ribs . . . Look, my dear, I'll get you a ring, and see about the announcement. We might even give a small party. . . . I'll arrange for you to have some proper clothes. In fact, I'd like to help you choose them. Oh, and by the way. Pack up the night life, will you? Go and live at a decent address. It'll look better on the certificate.'

'But, Vivian——'

'Yes, Diana?'

'Well . . . nothing. Not now, at least.' He was in the doorway, proposing to put her into a taxi and go back to the salesmen who made such a fuss of him. She nearly choked with disappointment. Stay with me . . . to-day, of all days . . . please! She wanted to cry out. She insisted on walking, in the end. 'The atmosphere—it's given me quite a head.'

The brisk, cold walk restored her. No happier woman ever hurried through West Kensington bestowing smiles on all the sour faces she passed. There was a light fog in the streets. All the red lights seemed blurred a little, like Alice's painting book. Feet slunk past her, chins sank deeper in collars against the cold, but Diana, warmed with an inner glow, hardly felt the pavements under her thin shoes. Vivian had chosen her, and everything was going to be brand-new and wonderful and exciting, from to-day!

She couldn't tell Alice properly, when she got home. Just seized her and kissed her and danced her round the room till a neighbour banged the wall for quiet. If Mrs. Bates had come in then, her normally reserved lodger would have fallen on her neck. 'Darling, darling, darling! I'm in love and it's wonderful. Oh, I am so happy——'

Alice recalled her, somewhat. 'You mean you've hooked him at last? Oh, well. . . . Di, Blackie only had four kittens, and they're drowned already.'

Vivian bought her a single sapphire—a handsome ring—but she was not invited to choose it. Any more than she had any say in the new clothes. Vivian had excellent taste (as the *vendeuse*, in ecstasies, kept repeating) and Diana could only agree. And smile, and admire, and thank. Presently she became alarmed at the collection of rich, sombre materials: the brocades, the velvets, the heeled slippers and the furs. Was she to spend her time between a night-club and a sofa? 'What do I wear out of doors, Vivian?' It looked as if she'd never feel sun and wind again.

Vivian considered her. 'I think you may safely choose some sports clothes yourself. I was only doing justice to your particularly dramatic beauty.'

'Well, thank you. But you're being awfully extravagant——'

'I am always extravagant. It's a thing I enjoy.'

'Lucky you. . . . Do you think I might smoke in this

wonderful room? Or would it be like smoking in church? There aren't any ash-trays——'

Vivian beckoned for an ash-tray, as a few weeks ago he'd beckoned for Diana, the cigarette girl. 'No, not that blue'—he burst out suddenly at the *vendeuse*, making Diana jump—'that's washerwoman's blue. I want a really deep colour—almost navy. Look at her eyes!'

The model, the *vendeuse* and Vivian stared intently into Diana's eyes, to her extreme embarrassment. To bring the question to a less personal angle, she said, 'Daddy used to say that only Siamese cats had blue eyes, really. Do you like Siamese cats, Vivian?'

For some reason Vivian looked quite murderous for a moment. 'I love cats—I told you so. But Siamese cats I loathe. My wife bred Siamese cats at the time of our estrangement.'

It was her first clue to the other Mrs. Carter, and she found herself inclined to be jealous. Had Vivian made this fuss about *her* clothes, and the colour of *her* eyes? She hadn't thought about another woman's shadow lying over their marriage. But she had her first cue, now. Under no circumstances breed Siamese cats!

Vivian drafted the announcement for *The Times*. Naturally. Diana wanted 'widow of Lt. T. Kimmidge, R.E.' and 'only child of the late Dr. and Mrs. Monroe, of Frensham,' but Vivian demurred. 'We don't want it too chatty—it's not dignified. And you can't possibly put your present address.'

'All right. But please put that I'm a widow. I think I should put it . . . for Alice's sake.' She didn't want to say, Don't make me sound divorced, too.

Vivian told her to leave it to him.

Her own preparations were simple. A note to Mr. Atreverso that she wouldn't be coming any more, and he could keep her pay in lieu of notice. Another to Alice's school, intimating removal. And a chat (over tea and cake) in Mrs. Bates' basement, where Alice had so many times been guest, and she had seldom penetrated.

Mrs. Bates was as pleased about Diana's engagement as if she'd made the match herself. She harped on luck and wealth and silver linings till Diana felt ready to flee the room, her tea untasted. 'I suppose you'll be making up for lost time, now.' That was another obscure remark, like calling her 'too pretty'.

'I'll send you some cake, and I really won't forget you.' Mrs. Bates, though her curiosity was a trial to the over-sensitive Diana, was a good soul, and had always been helpful with Alice. Diana felt mean not being able to say, Come to our wedding—and the reception afterwards, but Vivian had made it clear that he proposed to screen the guests.

'Oh, you won't have time for folks like us any more! First thing I said to Mrs. Kerensky (I met her outside the Staff Stores), I said, Well, there's one who won't be living in my house much longer. Not but it will be a fine thing for your little girl. Young enough to mould, I said to Mrs. K.'

'Er, yes. We shall miss you, of course.' Diana rose to go. In another minute Mrs. Bates would start hinting about little brothers and sisters, and somebody's nose being out of joint. 'That was a lovely cup of tea. Thank you so much.'

'It was in *The Times*, too——' Mrs. Bates was loath to let her go. 'Course, I don't read *The Times*, myself. Too much shipping and stuff. I like the *Express*, it's newsy. . . . But you've seen it, haven't you? Top of the column. They generally start with the nobs, but I suppose they didn't have any nobs this morning.' As a matter of fact Diana hadn't seen it, and she hurried out and bought a copy.

MR. VIVIAN J. H. CARTER AND MRS. KIMMIDGE

The engagement is announced, and the marriage will take place quietly in April, between Vivian John Howard Carter, of St. James Row, S.W.1, only son of the late Sir Howard and Lady Carter, of Beresford, Notts. and London, and Mrs. Diana Kimmidge.

That was how Diana learned she was to be married in April. She thought the biography unfairly divided. Nothing about Dr. Monroe. Or Frensham. Or Tim. Or her second name being Mary.

A strange thing had happened in her relationship with Vivian: or rather, failed to happen. They were exactly where they were, in the days of their first lunches together. He was her adviser, her arbiter on plays and clothes and even behaviour, her financier—for the first handsel money had passed between them, but not the first mention of love. She was gay and admiring of him, emphasising it a little, because she knew he loved it so. She really had no outlet at all for the independence he professed to like. He took her decisions for her: changed her hair-style: chose her rings. She submitted with a good grace, trying to call the gratitude she felt by another name, romance.

Vivian's a perfectionist, she reasoned. And then he's been spoilt. . . . Things will be different when we're married: when he begins living with me, instead of taking me out. Vivian was a man without hobbies, who lived for and through his friends, so that he always seemed busy. His formal manner to her (it was the same in public as in private) puzzled and hurt her, but she made allowances for him. I suppose he's at least fifty . . . Perhaps his leg hurts . . . Perhaps he's seen this play before. . . . His capacity for whisky frightened her, but he never seemed the worse for it, so she accepted his remark that 'drink was something you had to do, socially'. He never pressed her to drink if she didn't want to.

'Why did you choose April for our wedding, Vivian?' She thought it must have some significance for him.

'Oh . . . why not? Do you object?'

'No, of course not. I just wondered why.'

They were in the foyer of Covent Garden, all red and glass, walking elegantly up and down during the first interval of *The Sleeping Beauty*. Diana loved ballet. Even fat little Alice was determined to be a ballerina when she grew up. Diana would have to tell her about it in the

morning, so she could jump round the room among their half-packed cases to her own choreography.

'April's a lovely month,' Vivian was saying, softly. 'Full of hope, promise. Flowers opening. Women smiling. Everything's young again. Young.'

'You have to be young to learn ballet. Midge wants to learn, but she really isn't the build——'

'It's my lucky month, too.' Vivian could never be sidetracked when he was developing an idea of his own. 'I was commissioned in April . . . Decorated in April . . . I won the European Rally in April. Oh, someone cast my horoscope once, and told me it was lucky. I was born——'

'Not on April 1st?'

'On April 30th. What a childish mind you have—it must be living with Alice.'

Diana might have argued, but she didn't. The bell rang for them to go back to their seats. She tucked an arm under Vivian's. 'Do you know I'd never seen a ballet till you took me? I do envy all the lovely things you've seen and I never heard of.' What an ingenuous remark, she caught herself thinking. As if I was eighteen, instead of nearly thirty. I really think Vivian encourages me to be ingenuous—it makes him seem more wise and wonderful by contrast. .

'It will be different when we're married,' Vivian murmured.

'What? Will it? Oh, Vivian . . .' The seats were filling up again and they couldn't talk. How can I watch little stylized figures dancing a story, if the man I'm going to marry wants to talk to me?

'Naturally. Alice will be at boarding school, and we can look at things in peace.'

'They moved the following Monday, taking rooms in a private hotel overlooking the entrance to Kew Gardens. The people were quiet, middle-aged women, who saw nothing remarkable in an attractive widow re-marrying,

and were too polite to be curious. Vivian's car was no longer watched from windows, and Diana's good fortune discussed behind every door in the house. To Diana, the respite was heaven, but Alice missed Mrs. Bates and the signalman and her school-friends. She'd been upset at leaving, and kissed Mrs. Bates and every one of the area cats as if her heart would break. Diana lost patience with her.

'For heaven's sake, Mimi. Do be cheerful for Vivian——'

'How on earth can you invite trombone players in the Salvation Army to tea? And he's not really a colonel——'

'Do stop hanging round the towpath when they're dredging. Can't you read? Or walk in the gardens?'

But Alice, to whom the idea of walking (instead of running), quietness for its own sake, and solitary walks, was quite new, and who'd grown up tough and happy in her back-street, burst into noisy tears. 'Oh, Mummy, Di . . . I just can't do anything right for you. You're all different . . . since Vivian.'

Diana, overwhelmed at the accusation and the neglect which Alice implied, began to cry, too. She was on edge, and for many reasons. Vivian and she had nothing to wait for—except April, five months away, his 'lucky' month. Apart from Vivian, she had no friends. For the wives of the men who pumped her hand so cordially, replenished her glass, and told Vivian he was a lucky old so-and-so, she'd not suggest an acquaintance. Alice's manners (and she'd been so careful about them) didn't please Vivian. Frankly, children bored him. If only Alice could stay with relatives during this interim period, for her own sake . . . If only Vivian would make allowances for Alice . . . She missed her job, and she wasn't used to spending someone else's money, and now she had achieved security, she perversely wanted love.

They were both drying their eyes, when suddenly Alice saw Vivian's familiar black car from the window.

'Quick!' she gasped, clutching at her mother. 'He's here. Comb your hair, Di—I mean—Mummy.' In her excitement, she began to cry again.

They heard him being shown up to their sitting-room, which looked out across sedate Kew Green and its parish church. They both dabbed at their faces, Alice with a balled handkerchief, Diana with a clean towel.

'Go on, you talk to him, Midge——' Diana nearly pushed her daughter out of the room.

Vivian called out, 'Morning, Diana, are you ready? Well . . . hallo, Turnip. Why the waterworks? Here, catch.' He tossed her a packet. It was a pencil box—the first and only present he ever gave her.

Alice, with wonderful resilience, had recovered at once. A present—she had nobody but her mother to give her one—was almost a miracle. She thanked him shyly, but her glowing little face told him how miraculous she thought it was. 'I'll take it to school with me—and use it for ever.'

Keep it up, Midge, Diana prayed, applying make-up to her tell-tale face, and listening to them through the open door. Vivian was not fond of waiting.

'Hunting? That's riding, isn't it, with dogs?' Alice was certainly doing her best next door. 'Do you know the poster for Huntsman's Ales? It was on the hoarding near our signal-box—our signal-box that we used to live opposite—it had a lovely horse, and the man wore a red coat——'

'A pink coat, Alice.'

'No, it was red, in the poster. And he had thirteen dogs—I counted them—and there were some other horses behind, but the writing was in the way, so you couldn't see them. I love advertisements, don't you?'

'I can't say I ever look at them, much.'

'But do you really own a horse? What's its name? Where do you keep it?' Alice had a passion for all animals. Those she didn't own and couldn't visit she invented, which even led to her being called a liar, at

school. She continued in ecstasies about Vivian's horse. But how could he keep it in his flat?

Vivian told her it was at livery, and had to explain what he meant by that.

'If I had a horse, I'd ride it every day. I'd ride it twice a day——' Ownership was her yardstick of success. Diana had given it her, in those long drab years pre-Vivian.

Vivian was amused. He began to question Alice about her plans for herself. It was then that he promised her a puppy, and in the same breath talked about boarding schools. It was something he'd already mentioned to Diana, but Diana had told him firmly that she must be allowed to broach it to the child.

'Yes, I'd like to go,' agreed Alice readily. 'Shall I be allowed to take my puppy, though?'

'Won't you leave it at home?'

'But where is home?'

'Well, your mother and I are thinking of spending some time in the country——'

'Oh, goody!' Alice squealed, not realising that she was not included, except as a visitor. She rushed to find the matches for Vivian, who had taken a cigarette.

'Thanks.' He returned his lighter to his pocket, watching her puff it out.

And then Alice, momentarily freed of shyness, really put her foot in it. 'How many babies are you and Mummy going to have?' she asked hopefully. She was just old enough to shepherd the newest arrivals at school, and delighted in the service. There were no pets at the hotel, and she wasn't allowed in the kitchen, so her affections sought new channels. 'Will your son live with us, and be my brother?' Diana had told her Vivian had a son, but hadn't explained that he lived with his own mother.

'Certainly not,' snapped Vivian, thunder in his face. 'My son is grown up—you're only a child.'

'Well, you're quite old—compared to Mummy.' Half her school took Diana for her elder sister.

Vivian looked as if he was going to rescind the puppy

and the boarding school, and smack her into the bargain. He didn't, and Diana, hurrying in to them, over-radiant after her tears, saw Vivian smoking in the window, and Alice astride an armchair. She thought Vivian was angry about waiting, and laid a conciliatory hand on his arm.

'All set to go. I'm terribly sorry . . . I couldn't find something I wanted . . . Good-bye, Midge darling. See you later.'

Alice watched them drive away. She was frowning. Vivian was angry—and with her! She simply couldn't understand why. She'd love to see his horse, and his son—even if he was too big to play with her. She rehearsed every word of their conversation, and still she couldn't see how it was her fault.

At first, she'd been uncertain how to address him. Diana had suggested 'Uncle Vivian' till she discovered how much he hated it. Mr. Carter was appallingly formal, and Stepfather not yet correct. So she just called him Vivian. Copying her mother. He never commented at all on it.

Perhaps I should have called him Sir. The children at school had been told that was how they were to address the visiting minister, if he asked them a question.

Having promised to marry Vivian Carter, Diana really tried to love him, and to convince herself that he loved her. She had always known she couldn't marry without love. Indeed, as she thought of the multiple adjustments, tact and patience required, it didn't seem possible that anyone could marry without it. Without love . . . the years stretched endlessly before her. Birthdays and Christmases, high days and holidays, red days and black days . . . Alice growing up and marrying. Vivian ageing, sickening, dying . . . Herself a grandmother, in her chair, alone . . . No, they must love each other—they must. And after all, her meeting with Vivian, and her engagement to him, were the stuff of romance. She was sure his quick flashes of temper were her own fault, or poor Alice's. She strove desperately to please him, or at least to avoid displeasing

him. It will be different when we're married. She clung to that.

Diana reasoned as a young girl, because at heart she was a young girl. She'd been cheated of romance with poor old Tim (not that it was his fault, or hers) and here was her second chance, the big relationship of her life, the one she daren't miff.

She lay awake at nights, listening to the quiet river, the nightbirds in the gardens, Alice's heavy breathing through the communicating door. What was her real attraction for Vivian? Was he marrying her for the superficial reasons he'd given her at the Motor Show? Was it a quixotic gesture, or one of pity, or pique? But Vivian wasn't particularly quixotic, and he wasn't in any hurry to enjoy her charms—she hardly imagined it was her mind that fascinated him—so she was back where she started. Facing the thing she didn't want to face. Vivian was trying to recapture youth through her, a sort of zombie youth. It frightened her.

Love begets love, she insisted to herself. Something must give. Vivian's remoteness, his formality—or her patience. These were arguments that lay curled up on her chest all night, like a nightmare cat, and stalked away harmlessly in the daytime. After all, she hadn't thought about loving poor old Tim until he proposed. Tim was just an escort—somebody Mummy trusted to bring her home on time. She knew that, had she been older, she'd probably have said No to Tim. Tim's loving her had swept through her defences, and she hadn't reasoned.

But I am reasoning now, she told herself in the long watches of the night. I love Vivian—however insensitive to it he may be at present. We're going to marry . . . and live happily ever after. She generally dropped off, exhausted, about that time, and Alice bouncing on her bed was the next thing she knew.

She wasn't unhappy. Vivian took her about, showing her off, introducing her to people he knew. The men all seemed to live in clubs, instead of homes. Time and again,

Diana found herself the only woman in the party, excluded by her sex from whatever bound these middle-aged men together in companionship. They treated Vivian as a sort of king when he appeared among them. Diana, in her corner, sipped her drink and tried to follow brightly. They let Vivian pay for their drinks and sometimes, quite openly, they borrowed money off him. But their wives maintained a coolness towards her. Sometimes she wondered what would happen if one of Vivian's friends was an attractive man of her own age who set out to charm her? Would it draw Vivian nearer to her, or would she fall for the newcomer? It was a dangerous test, and one she did not have to make. As Vivian Carter's fiancée she was sacrosanct. A sort of vestal.

The weeks passed in a crescendo of spring. Kew Gardens were full of crocuses, and buds, and daffodils. The line of parked cars lengthened at the gates. Alice had made friends with several of the gardeners, and was shown special plants behind the scenes, and allowed to pick an orange. Diana, who no longer had to catch up on her sleep in daylight, had time to take her to the dentist, the zoo, the circus. Alice chattered confidently about her boarding school, her puppy, her dancing lessons. Seeing the child adapting herself so easily, gave Diana courage. What would they be doing this time next year? Decorating the parish church for Easter, perhaps. Mrs. Monroe always took Diana to help her with the flowers.

Vivian was a late riser, so Diana had at least part of each day free for Alice. What with shopping, and sight-seeing, and briefing Alice how to behave with Vivian, the weeks of the engagement passed.

Vivian had long chosen the date. Now he chose the church and the details. Even what she was to wear. Diana had favoured a pastel gown, with Alice trotting behind her. An armful of spring flowers. A hat with a veil. . . . Vivian chose a navy silk suit and hat. An outsize orchid. And no attendants. Diana had no suitable woman friend to

support her, so it was Vivian again who chose a team—a Colonel Somebody and a Mrs. Lunt.

‘I want you to meet Prinny soon,’ he told her. ‘I’ve a feeling you’ll get on well. After all, you’ve something in common.’

Diana meant to inquire what it was, but just then Alice bounded in to say that the river steamers started next month, and where would they be, next month?

‘You’ll be at school, darling.’

An excellent school in the country had been recommended, and Alice’s keenness to get there was only surpassed by Vivian’s to see her gone.

‘The eternal triangle!’ he complained. ‘I’ll be glad when that young woman gets a man of her own.’ Alice, having shed her initial shyness, had developed an interest and affection for him that he didn’t reciprocate. Before Vivian, there had been neither father, guardian, nor Santa Claus. She watched him closely, and identifying herself with her mother, assumed a sort of proprietary interest in him. It led to so many snubs that she retreated hurt, but baffled. Diana, understanding, tackled Vivian, and they had a near-row. Vivian had just planned their honeymoon in France, and the problem of Alice became urgent.

‘But we can’t just park the child anywhere——’

‘Don’t flap, Diana. I tell you, Prinny will take her.’

‘But I don’t know this Prinny——’

‘Leave things to me. I have experience, and I have friends—two essentials which you don’t seem to have: an abundance. Prinny went to Australia for Christmas—you surely don’t expect her to chase back just to meet you? She’s coming to your wedding. She’s offered a home to your child. You’ll probably drink cups of tea in each other’s houses for the rest of your lives, tearing my character to shreds. I’ve known Prinny for years——’

‘You’re . . . not in love with her?’

Vivian looked amazed. ‘Certainly not. Whenever we meet, she succeeds in rubbing me the wrong way, and I question both her taste and her judgment. However . . .’

'Then she doesn't sound a very suitable person for Alice.'

'Good heavens, woman! She'll be the best thing that ever happened to that kid. You fuss her much too much.'

'Then you do like her?'

'Of course I like her . . . in small doses. That is to say . . . I respect her qualities. Don't imagine me in love with every woman I know. Prinny is rather a privileged person.'

'Is she married?' If Vivian had chosen her best friend as well, Diana wanted details. Besides, this was evidently a woman out of the Mickey class. One Vivian took seriously.

'She was.' Vivian answered her question reluctantly.

'Well . . . has she children?'

'She has a son. Now look here, I'm not going to be cross-examined about Prinny. You can ask your own questions when you meet.'

Diana didn't insist. It was all too easy to upset Vivian. A chance word, a shrug—and a curtain fell in his face for the rest of the day. Diana couldn't discover what did it, she could only watch to avoid it. She was sensitive to Vivian's moods, quick to admit his good points, willing to minimise his bad ones. He was vain, and extravagant and selfish—but there was no evil in him. He hadn't got enough imagination. She was in love with him, and every check of his hurt her intolerably.

Vivian's whole behaviour, his remoteness, his club life, the obscure church chosen—she debited them all to the same source. The wife who divorced him. He must have loved her frightfully, she thought, impressed. She even felt a little jealous. She's certainly made things very difficult for me. . . . He'll get over her in time, I hope, when we settle down. . . . I'll be very tactful. Patient. Loving. I can't question him—but I may find out from his friends.

The idea of healing a broken heart appealed to her. The

worse the breakage, the more worthwhile the job. The greater the ultimate reward.

She sat down at her dressing-table to touch up her face before they went out. Vivian was proud of her beauty. Now she questioned her white face, that Vivian had called once 'a lily on a long stem'. It looked more like a cabbage on a long stalk, she thought. It always did, when she was worried. She wondered if the last Mrs. Carter had been better looking. Vivian had always suggested not. She couldn't, surely, have been younger.

In the last days of fittings and telephonings Diana managed to forget her, completely.

At last she stood, empty-handed, in the dim unfriendly church with Vivian at her side and his friends, ten pews deep, behind her. The day hadn't started too well, and she was sure Vivian must be angry. He hadn't said ten words to her, and he'd smoked right up to the ceremony, and now his face was a mask, a mask of hostility, and impatience. The colonel was an elderly man, correct and rather intimidating. Mrs. Lunt hadn't arrived, and there was no message. But they couldn't delay, because there was another wedding at the church at midday, and Vivian's impatience seemed to have spread to the guests. His own best man, an elderly relative, had retired to a nursing home a week ago, and Vivian hadn't forgiven him, yet. One of his club friends had been substituted. Mrs. Monroe's favourite hymn had been dismissed as 'sentimental'.

Sunlight struggled through coloured glass, creating jazz patterns on surplices, for the wedding was fully choral. (Diana had long realised that anything involving Vivian was never done 'quietly'.) The reflected light made the colonel's fine white head mauve, and her own mauve orchid green, and played havoc with the clothes of the women. She was acutely aware of the rustle and whisper behind them, and felt sure it must annoy Vivian. Mentally, they're fingering my clothes: or my character: or saying how lucky I am. And how fishy it looks, my not

having a relative of my own, here. For Diana was quite alone. Poor Alice, her only friend, had been banished outside. There were not only strangers around her, the man she was marrying was a stranger, too.

Suddenly, unbidden, the image of Tim was before her. She never thought of him, now, and she didn't want to think of him to-day, of all days. Perhaps it wasn't so much Tim—it was the setting. She'd been married before in a church, with the same hymn, and the same agony of nerves. What had she worn before? A suit . . . because clothes were rationed, then. And flowers, off a barrow. It was spring-time then . . . as now. She'd had thirty-six hours with Tim, then Good-bye. She'd had Vivian's acquaintance nearly a year, and it was still an acquaintance.

The minister was in front of them, speaking. Now! thought Diana, now! I ought to run away . . . seize Alice . . . jump in a taxi. Escape. Escape where? Back to Mrs. Bates? To the Band Box? No, I'd look too silly. Vivian would look silly—and he'd never forgive that. Probably the door's locked. The people behind me wouldn't let me pass—they're his friends, not mine. Vivian doesn't see me as a woman—he sees me as something he's pinned down in his collection, like a butterfly. I don't think he sees people as people. They're just the furniture of his life. He sits on them, or removes them when they fail to please him!

She turned to Vivian, desperate for reassurance, for a token. He took her hand. But only to put the ring on it. They did not exchange rings, and he dropped it at once. Suddenly there was a blast of music beside her, making her jump. The organ was playing a march.

It was dark in the vestry, and smelled like a strong-room. She heard Vivian giving his name and address, and his occupation as company director. She couldn't listen to the rest. She couldn't listen to the verger mumbling congratulations. She wanted to shout, 'Vivian, do you love me? Don't sign, if you don't', but already the certificate was being handed to her. Vivian gave the verger money.

Diana, having no handbag, gave the certificate back to Vivian.

She found Alice outside, licking an ice and mumbling something about counting dogs. Alice was all the reason for her being, unless she could make her new husband love her, and she kissed and hugged the child affectionately until Vivian touched her arm. They hurried away in cars to the reception, in order of precedence, Vivian and Diana first. The colonel, glaring somewhat, had taken charge of Alice.

They were due to leave for Paris by air after lunch, and the mysterious Mrs. Lunt still hadn't appeared. Surely Vivian didn't think poor Alice was going to stay with the colonel for a fortnight? What had happened? Diana began to fret.

Vivian was on edge, too, and they jagged at once. 'For God's sake, Diana. Prinny's been delayed—that's all. Even if she never turns up, there are servants to feed the child.'

'But I'm not leaving Alice with anyone's servants. I want to know who's looking after her.'

'For a young woman who offered to "pin anyone's bloody ears back" who touched my car—I speak of the days when I first knew you, when she constituted herself my watchdog and your chaperone—I should say she could manage anyone's servants. You made a disgusting exhibition of yourself on the church steps. I thought you were going to howl—both of you.'

'I love Alice.'

'All right. But don't behave so damn protectively to her in front of other people. It looks as if I beat the brat, or something.'

'Don't you dare call my daughter a brat!'

'Control yourself, Diana.'

This was the moment when he should have been holding her hand, stealing a kiss, promising her happiness, love. If only he'd make a gesture, tell her she looked beautiful, even

look at her. . . . This was how he'd remember her for ever, her first moments as his wife.

Instead of which he was glowering at the nape of the driver's neck and tapping on his watch-glass.

Diana burst into messy tears. 'I don't know why you married me!'

Vivian spoke like a patient man dealing with an idiot. 'I wanted a lovely young hostess, a *châtelaine*. You wanted security for yourself and your child. Am I wrong?' Never, never would she forget the disgust with which he watched her tears.

It was impossible to answer him. To say Yes, you're wrong! I want all that, and love, as well. . . . Or, No, to hell with security. I've never even thought about your money. She was caught, either way. She gulped 'Please don't be angry. My head aches. I'm not used to being the centrepiece when you're there——'

'Stop talking. Lean back and wipe your face.' He thrust his handkerchief into her hands and reached for the blinds. There were stares on the pavement for the weeping bride. 'We'll be at the hotel in a minute. I've dozens of other friends who'll take the child for a couple of weeks, if necessary.'

She controlled herself, and smiled feebly. 'Yes, Vivian. I'm sorry. . . . Please forgive me.' She raised wet blue eyes to his grey ones. 'It's as bad as quarrelling in the church porch, isn't it?'

He didn't answer.

'Vivian?'

'Yes?'

The word stuck in her throat. She'd never used it to him before. 'Darling . . .'

He couldn't have heard. The car stopped, and he handed her out. 'Damn Prinny,' he muttered under his breath.

There were about a hundred people at the reception, and all of them said something pleasant to Diana . . . and forgot her. There were a few peers and an M.P. and a sports

writer present, and the editor of *Car Racing*, who wrung her hand and told her she ought to be proud of her husband. Diana was very ready to be proud of Vivian, but he refused to discuss his triumphs with her. 'One can't talk cars to a woman, and—as you keep pointing out—it all happened before you were born!'

'It's men like your husband who woke up public interest in motor racing, Mrs. Carter'—it was the first time she'd heard her new name used—'They were the pioneers. Ah yes, the pioneers of yesterday are the veterans of tomorrow!' He left her convinced he was quoting out of his own editorial.

Vivian was of course the centre of attraction, and he loved it. Those who couldn't actually talk to him stood around in little knots of their own, talking about him.

'Well, I still think he's marvellous. Goes on for ever, like Longfellow's brook——'

'Tennyson's brook.'

'Was it? Well, that's what I meant.'

'All I remember of the Italian campaign was mud!' It was Diana's colonel. 'No champagne, thanks. May I have scotch? Oh, thanks very much. WHEN.'

'Of course, I can't imagine a cosy fireside with Vivian, though——'

'You don't have to, Celia. It wasn't you he asked.'

'Personally, I came to see Prinny.' It was a woman's voice. The sort of voice that went with a good fur coat and a flat on the right side of the park. 'I adore Prinny. I always said Vivian was a perfect fool——'

'Ssh. She's behind you.' Celia's voice did drop from *fortissimo* to *forte*, then. 'Do you know what I heard? She was a barmaid! No . . . a cigarette-girl!'

'Wait till Hendry sees her.'

'Let me get you another drink, Mrs. Carter. You see how popular your husband is!' It was the colonel, faithful to his obligations. 'Your little girl tells me she's very fond of dogs. You haven't tried breeding for show? Pity, there's nothing like a well-bred, well-trained dog.' He stood

solidly in front of her, blocking her view. When he moved, the hostile women had melted away.

'~~Di-----~~' Alice was tugging at her. 'Where's the lady you said I was going to stay with? Why are those people laughing? What's it like inside an aeroplane? I wish I could come, too.'

'Some other time, darling. . . . I don't know. Look, have some fruit salad. You like that.'

'If I eat anything at all I'll be sick,' Alice decided. 'Probably I'll be sick, anyway. I'm all butterflies inside. Perhaps it's because you're going away——'

'Oh, darling, you said you wouldn't mind. . . . And Vivian saw you eating ice-cream in the churchyard. He didn't like it, you know.'

'He shouldn't have given me sixpence, then.'

'But it's not the done thing, Midge. Not in a churchyard.'

'Perhaps I won't be sick if we play a game,' Alice suggested quickly. 'It was a pink one,' she remembered.

'We can't play games, now, Alice.' Diana's voice was sharp with her own humiliation. 'You must be quiet, quiet as a mouse. Whatever would Vivian think?'

'If we had some string we could play cat's cradle.' Alice was getting bored with what Vivian thought. She sensed that her mother was upset. She didn't know why, but she wanted to help. She dug in her new pockets, and found one glove and a leaf and a toffee paper.

This is an idiotic question, Diana was thinking. To be odd girl out at your own wedding! She moved determinedly towards her husband, but at the same time he turned away towards another man. They were talking about planes. Apparently Vivian flew: or had flown.

Diana retreated quickly to Alice. There could only be one thing worse than inattention: attention because poor Alice had been taken ill.

Suddenly the door opened, and the whole atmosphere changed. The men touched their ties, squared their

shoulders, moved forward in a body. The women pressed behind them, chorusing with delight and squealing 'Darling!' Diana thought for a moment the Queen had arrived. Well, not the Queen, but an ambassadress, or a famous actress, at least. Everyone was talking at once, so that it was difficult to see who was at the centre of the group. Even Vivian forgot his planes and pushed his way to the newcomer.

'Darling!'

'My dear Vivian, congratulations!' The newcomer kissed him fraternally, and looked round. 'Hallo, Terence—thought you were in Kenya. Hallo, Celia! Katy! James! Oh, how is James II? My dear Colonel Muspratt, how are you?'

She was a big woman, no longer very young, expensively dressed, but not beautiful. There was nothing particular to distinguish her, and yet there was something that did distinguish her, immediately. She had a personality that put everyone present, including Vivian, into the shade. There was a warmth, a boisterousness, about this woman, a sort of confidence and sanity, that drew people towards her. Diana, yet unknown to her, felt drawn herself. But she was dumbfounded to see Vivian eclipsed! Dismissed with a peck on the cheek and a compliment on his tailoring.

The stranger finished greeting acquaintances and took his arm. Her eye fell on the wondering Alice. 'Hallo, Twopence. I bet I know who you are. We'll talk in a minute. Now, Vivian, my dear. I owe you a thousand apologies. A million, if you like. But don't let's waste time. Where is she?'

Suddenly the woman was in front of her, and the other guests looked excited and curious. Diana reached out a hand for the introduction and felt both hers seized in warm, ungloved ones. 'My dear . . . I'm terribly, terribly sorry. You must have thought I did it purposely. I should have been here hours ago. I'm Prinny Lunt. I had a message early this morning from my son's school. Appendicitis.

Emergency operation. I had to stand by till it was all over—'

'But how kind of you to rush straight here—you shouldn't have bothered,' Diana protested. 'If it had been Alice, I should have gone crazy.' Alice, now beside her, was devouring the stranger with her eyes. 'I do hope your son's not gravely ill.'

'No. The flap's over. It's just routine, now. But you know how schools are. . . . I wouldn't have upset your day for worlds. Well, Vivian, she's lovely—simply lovely. I compliment you on your taste and your choice.'

Vivian looked complacent. 'Glad you approve.'

'All you have to do now is to live happily ever after.'

'Don't see why we shouldn't.'

Prinny took Diana's hands again. 'I hope you'll be very, very happy. I'm sure you deserve it. Don't worry about Alice. Something tells me we shall get on marvelously.'

Vivian said coldly, 'And how is your boy—apart from the trouble that made you so late?'

'Six foot, and husky. You two should meet, sometime.'

'You always whisk him abroad with you.'

'You appear to have other interests.'

'How am I to take that, Prinny?'

'As far as the new Mrs. Carter is concerned, as a compliment.' She smiled reassuringly at Diana. 'Vivian has so many claims on his time, he sometimes forgets . . . friends.'

'I'm sure nobody could forget you.' It was spontaneous, Diana's reaction to the only warmth and welcome she'd received that day. Prinny smiled at her kindly, as if she knew just how she felt.

'We'll have a hen party with Alice, we three, when you come back from France. You can spend the evening at your club, Vivian, and tell them how you got fined for speeding in 1899.'

Diana realised they were sparring, but she couldn't think why. Who could she be, she wondered? A woman who

dared to laugh at Vivian, and on whose opinion he evidently set store! Her feeling of jealousy faded, now she was face to face with Prinny, and Prinny had gathered her into her circle—instead of gathering Vivian, and excluding her. People are cagey at first, she reminded herself, willing now to excuse her other guests. It'll be better later on, when they know me in my own home. Mrs. Bates had called Vivian 'a good catch' and she couldn't help wondering how many of the women present had wanted him for themselves.

She smoothed a pleat in her shining suit. It was very smart, but she didn't really feel at home in it. And now at last she was back among her 'own' sort of people, she didn't feel at home with them, either. Like the war-time evacuees who returned to stranger parents. She'd been away too long.

She saw, too, as clearly as Rodney Harmer saw, the idiosyncrasies of her own set. The easy 'darlings', the affected voices, the little spites and unkindnesses she'd suffered already. But Prinny Lunt was standing beside her; now, a bastion of commonsense and homely strength. Prinny was almost a polished version of Mrs. Bates, whom she'd wanted to invite, and remembered with more affection than she'd ever felt the years she lived with her. Prinny was the sort of person who'd say 'Come to tea next Tuesday week' and expect you to come, and bestir herself to toast things. . . . Why, she even had a slight accent—

'I do hope you feel we can be friends?'

'But of course! I want to be friends!' Diana was speaking from her heart. 'I'll probably need friends—I'd forgotten what cats women are.'

Prinny shrugged the ranch mink on her broad shoulders. 'Jealousy, my dear. Not worth worrying over.'

'It's sweet of you to take Alice, with your own boy ill—'

'Well, he's in hospital for ten days at least, so they probably won't meet. She won't trouble me, I assure you.'

She's not upset about the marriage, is she? Kids do get queer ideas——'

'Oh, no. She's quite fond of Vivian.'

'Really? I didn't notice he had much appeal for children. But I'm sure you'll handle him beautifully. If you get sick of his friends, come and gossip with mine. I'm an Australian, you know. We don't stand on ceremony.' Her eyes wandered to Alice. 'Seeing we're going to live together for a fortnight, let's get acquainted. Are you bringing any pets? Tell me what puddings you like——'

Diana relaxed. Prinny Lunt was a splendid person. She'd understand about the cheap digs and the boy bridegroom Tim, and she'd probably hoot over the ribbon uniforms at the Band Box, which made the girls look like thumbs-up dolls. And probably she'd give her the low-down on the previous Mrs. Carter wherein, Diana was sure, lay the clue to Vivian's present behaviour.

She pushed her way to her husband and smiled at the question in his raised brows. 'We're doing fine. Everyone's congratulated me, too!'

'I think we'd better cut the cake. I see the colonel clearing his throat. He's going to say a few words, unless somebody gives him a drink.'

They stood side by side for the cutting of the cake, for the photographs, the toasts. Prinny kept loyally in the background, showing everyone that she considered it Diana's day. Diana felt heartened for the future. She smiled at stranger eyes above raised glasses. She smiled at Alice.

'Don't eat unless you're quite, quite sure, Midge. And be good with Mrs. Lunt. She's so nice.'

Alice nodded vigorously, and sipped her half-glass of champagne. 'It's horrid,' she whispered, 'can't I have some water?'

When she'd attended to Alice, the guests had regrouped. Vivian was in conversation with a stranger. A man of his own build and colouring, but younger and gentler looking, and at the same time, weaker. Vivian's brother! guessed

Diana, amazed at the likeness. And I never knew he had one. She crossed over to them, laughing. 'Vivian, you are a dark horse—you never told me!'

It seemed to her that Vivian introduced his companion unwillingly. 'Of course I did. You've forgotten. Diana, this is my son, Hendry. Hendry—Diana, my wife.'

'Oh. . . .' Without authority, she'd assumed that the son was a big schoolboy, and this man looked thirty. 'I'm—I'm very pleased to meet you.'

'Diana.' He turned the name on his tongue like wine, and even the voice was Vivian's. But the handgrip was not so strong. 'Queen and huntress, chaste and fair—but you're dark as a moonless midnight, aren't you?' He held her hand a moment too long. 'No, what does one say at a moment like this?' He appealed to her, ignoring his father. 'How d'you do? Or, Welcome to the fold? My third stepmother! Third time lucky. The occasion merits a kiss.' He took one. 'H'm. Chaste but not at all fair. You turned your head away.'

Vivian's head was sunk. A bull letting the toreador approach. He jerked it up angrily. 'That'll do. You probably won't see much of each other. Hendry's job keeps him fully occupied—or it should do. I hope you'll remember that.' He nearly pushed the younger man towards the colonel, leaving Diana to recover as best she could. Third? she thought distractedly. Three? Who else, then——?

Vivian returned to her, and vouchsafed the brief explanation. 'I married Hendry's mother when I was a mere boy. It was my father's urging. She died when Hendry was born. . . . Then I was not so lucky. . . . My last wife divorced me, too. But I told you that.'

'Too?' Who was he, Bluebeard?

'Yes.' Impatience clipped his voice.

'You mean, I'm the fourth Mrs. Carter?'

'Why not? You knew you weren't the first. Be rational, do. I'm not an awkward boy, like your first effort. Oh, for God's sake, don't cry again. I hate tears.'

Do consider my position. Ah, Muspratt's leaving—I must speak to him.' He left her, only aware that the large colonel was taking Hendry with him. Everyone was going, in fact.

Gloved hands touched hers, and voices clattered in her ears, all saying the same thing. 'Good-bye. . . . Good luck. Do look us up when you get back—Vivian knows. Lucky Vivian. Brave you. All the best.'

The hot room revealed its wreckage under blazing lights. Flowers and glasses and cigarette-ends. Uneaten cake. A dropped glove. A waiter who yawned, waiting to clear. . . . Prinny, who'd disappeared, came back with an excited Alice, to say Good-bye.

'Good-bye, Precious. Got your case? Be good, then. I'll write every day.'

'Good-bye, Di. Oooh, you're squeezing me. Did you know that Mrs. Lunt's got four cats and a garden with a fishpond and a budgie called Twinkle she lets out of the cage and——' Vivian's presence checked her. She gave him a moist paw, not knowing what to say.

'Good-bye, Lovebirds. All the best.' Prinny touched Diana's cheek and clicked her fingers at Vivian.

'Give my regards to Hal. I trust he'll recover.' Vivian sounded awkward.

'Give them to him yourself—I don't mind.' She was gone, with Alice in tow. The door slammed. The room was suddenly quieter. Cooler. They were alone.

Now, thought Diana, now. This is the start of our honeymoon. Of our life together. She smiled expectantly at her husband, taking his hand. 'Peace at last.'

Vivian fingered his tie. 'Oh, one has to have a show of some sort. It's expected.'

'As long as you enjoyed it, Vivian.'

'I had many compliments about you. I enjoyed that.'

'Yes?' And suddenly her traitor tongue said, 'How tired you look. Fagged out. Let's go and change——'

'I'm never tired,' lied Vivian furicously. 'Don't nag

me. Are you changed? Very well, then. You'd better hurry' He turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

Diana's mother had taught her long ago that if she wanted to give way to temper, she must repeat the whole of the Lord's Prayer first. When she was older, she adopted the more secular habit of counting up to ten. She counted now, under her breath, and when she'd finished, she was still too numb and hurt to give way to anything. She was alone, and there was nobody to give her justice. Nobody to listen to her, or console, or advise.

Nothing, except Vivian's own consolation.

The whisky bottle brought in for the colonel was still there, two-thirds full. Diana poured some into a tumbler, without measuring, and gulped it down neat. It released the tears which she had held back for Vivian's sake, and when she blinked her eyes free at last, she saw that Vivian's proud orchid was bruised, probably in Prinny's embrace, and she unpinned it and threw it on the table in disgust. She went slowly to the room reserved for her, and changed.

The whisky saw her through the drive to Northolt, the monotony of the flight, the Customs. It didn't solve her problems, but it did shelve them. Suddenly she was beside Vivian in a car, and he was driving on the wrong side of the road. That roused her, but she didn't like to speak of it.

She saw a river—that must be the Seine—buildings, bicycles. Posters. Trees. They were in full fresh leaf, homely, familiar.

'Chestnut trees!' she cried happily.

'That's the first thing you've said since Temple Bar.' Vivian was furious, she saw with amazement. They were in an open car, and the sun dappled the green shade deliciously, even hurting her eyes. She tried to see the flowers, the magazine covers and the kiosks, to savour it all. Her head hurt when she turned it—— 'So cheerful! Such a conversationalist! Brilliant!'

'Vivian . . . what's the matter?'

'Nothing.' Vivian's face was really savage. 'Nothing! Your revolting child was sick all over the foyer of the hotel. A place where I'm known, d'you understand? And you've been in a drunken stupor ever since we left London. You have no regard for my feelings—absolutely none.'

CHAPTER IV

THEY stayed six days in Paris, and after the first, Diana Carter knew everything there was to know about Vivian, except the extent of his vanity. She refused to be put out by the discovery that he did, indeed, dye his hair. Or his coyness (more exasperating than a fading beauty's) about his age. She could sympathise with poor health, and a right leg amputated below the knee. But she couldn't forgive her husband's utter indifference to her as a person. If poor Alice was 'Diana's female appendage', poor Diana soon found she was to be Vivian's.

'I can't put rubies on my fingers and diamonds in my hair—but I can put them in my wife's,' Vivian told her once. His love of jewellery was almost an obsession. 'You were born to wear diamonds, Diana. You could wear a crown.' Her idea of buying Alice a little filigree bracelet had been dismissed with contempt. 'For heaven's sake—bazaar stuff.'

'The Persians load their women with jewellery to impress their friends.' She remembered reading it.

'Who are the Persians, anyway?'

'Better known for "bazaar stuff" than gallantry, I've heard.' But the waiter was wheeling in champagne in a bucket, and Vivian was saved an answer.

Diana turned away. Her heart was thumping madly, as it always did when she dared to differ from Vivian.

Their first-floor suite gave on to a main avenue. It was only seven o'clock on a spring evening. Single figures were loitering at the top of the metro steps, their faces brightening as friends claimed them, and hurried them away. Diana, married, felt lonelier than she'd ever felt since the loss of poor old Tim. Even Alice, her uncritical, adoring

Alice, was far away. Perhaps she'd fallen into the fish-pond already! Or Prinny had tired of looking after her! Diana turned from the window and stretched out her arms to her husband, a beggar queen. 'Vivian, please—'

'Here you are!' He was beside her, but offering her a glass of champagne, not himself. He continued pleasantly, 'Since we are in Paris, I may as well explain that I should prefer this marriage to continue "blanc" as the French call it. You can dance—you can flirt—with whomsoever you fancy, as long as I am there to keep an eye on you.'

Diana gasped. 'But I didn't marry you in order to amuse myself with somebody else!'

Vivian stared at the tree-tops and the metro, and carefully shut the window which Diana had flung open. 'After Jennifer Hendry's death, I married an actress. Rather a bad one, I'm afraid. Then I married a pianist. She made no allowances for me at all. . . . So you see, I've had sudden death and temperament and sheer cussedness to deal with, in my experience of marriage,' he told her, tapping a cigarette on his thin gold case. 'And I don't want hysteria, as well. We've made a bargain, you and I. Consider that I have taken on a quick-tempered ignoramus of a young woman, with no particular virtues, and a child into the bargain, and fulfil your part gracefully. Naturally, I have faults . . . but they're not anti-social ones. I want to show you off—not lock you up in a tower, like a miser. I want the men I know to compare you to their women and feel envious. It's easy for you, Diana. Their women are suet, and you're silk.'

'You want—literally—a show girl!'

'And?'

'And I'm a woman, a human being. I want to be a wife.'

'You want to be sensible,' her husband told her flatly. 'I don't ask for much. A little flattery, perhaps . . . a little sympathy . . . consideration of my comfort and my

tastes. You can have the time of your life, Diana. You're so alive! You've got a sort of glow!' He was holding her wrists, hurting her. Her untasted glass spilled over an armchair and rolled on to a cushion dented by its contents. There was no sound but Vivian's stifled breathing and the unconcerned traffic under the window. Diana backed away, scared but more angry than anything. So that was it! That was why everyone was curious and aloof and faintly patronising. Vivian was three parts mad! She broke violently from him and ran into her bedroom and slammed the door. He didn't pursue her. She sat down trembling, outraged, her new jewellery a slave's collar around her neck.

He knocked on her door a few minutes later, his voice and manner normal. 'I'm ready when you are, my dear.' They went out to dine in an over-lit restaurant full of tourists having an aggressively good time, by their noise. Vivian's humour was restored, but Diana was sick and trembling inside at the scene they'd had. Vivian chose the food and wine, surrounded by a deferential posse of waiters, impressed with his knowledge. She couldn't touch the meal, though her husband pressed her to try. Vivian didn't like their fellow diners, but he enjoyed disapproving of them. 'Paris isn't what it was,' he told her.

Diana would have adored to know what Paris was, within the span of Vivian's knowledge of it. She tried to imagine a younger Vivian, in top hat and opera cloak, driving through a gas-lit Paris in a clattering cab. But she could only look as he looks now, she decided, I'm sure he hasn't changed.

She looked from the easy-smiling faces to her husband. Vivian's eyes were on her, two hostile stones. 'Perhaps you'd rather see "Paris by Night" with a coach party?'

'Of course I wouldn't. What an idea!'

'Is it? Well, you're very silent. And you haven't touched your wine.'

She raised her glass, making him do the same. 'To us, then. To our health and prosperity and . . . happiness.'

He drank, not taking his eyes from hers. 'You are the most beautiful woman in the room and you're mine!' There was a wealth of satisfaction in his voice, almost of achievement. 'People are asking who you are—and if you're famous!'

'How disappointed they'd be, if they knew.'

'Think how disappointed I'd be, if I thought that being Mrs. Vivian Carter meant nothing to you.'

Façade is everything! It might have been their motto, during the honeymoon. Wherever they went, whatever they did, they were careful to keep up appearances. Vivian was the generous, attentive husband—no one could doubt his pride in his lovely young wife—and Diana was the happy, loving wife. In the hotel, they were the distinguished English couple with the balcony suite. They had flowers and tickets and gay pastel boxes marked Rue de la Paix delivered daily. They came and went together, speaking only to each other. After a day or two, Vivian made a few acquaintances and had a drink with the manager. Not because he considered him an equal, but because they had been in the same field hospital in 1917. Diana bought clothes (of Vivian's choosing), admired buildings and drank apéritifs at café tables. She bought souvenirs for Alice (which her husband condemned on examining) and wrote daily postcards to Alice, to Prinny, even to Mrs. Bates. She went to the races and the opera and a grand ball, in aid of the British Hospital. Vivian complained privately that Paris was boring, and he couldn't find a soul he knew. But they kept up the façade.

The staff envied them—Vivian was still the English milor, an archaic figure who never bothered to wait for change—and the pageboy, scuttling to obey the orders of Monsieur Cartaire, and trying to anticipate those of Madame, thought him wonderful. If England still produced such men, such tips, why was he saving up to go to America?

Diana enjoyed everything—when Vivian allowed her to. They hired a car, and while Vivian muttered at its faults

and its performance, she sat beside him, full of wonder and delight. She was quick to find excuses for Vivian. He isn't mad, of course, she reasoned as she sat beside him. He's just over-excitable. And I've always known he was spoilt, and not very young. And this marriage is as big an adjustment for him as for me—especially after his various disappointments. In her heart, she never doubted that Vivian was to blame. But actresses and musicians weren't easy wives for any man. She was not an artist, therefore she had a great advantage. She would never dispute the limelight with Vivian. But she would be a good supporting player. He could rely on her for that.

'Oh, look'—she laid her arm on her husband's—'what's that barrack-looking place with all the courtyards?'

'Versailles. If you've heard of it?'

'But of course I've heard of it. Who hasn't?'

'Not many people mistake it, however. Shall we lunch?'

Once they were coming back to their hotel on foot, and Vivian suddenly stopped her by pointing dramatically in a shop window. 'Look!'

'What at?' The shop sold calendars, wax, dingy bill-heads, artists' materials. Diana was mystified.

'Us,' said Vivian simply. 'What a couple! Haven't you heard people talk? Even your schoolgirl French must be good enough for that.' Taller than average, slim, dark, coldly polite and difficult to please, they did indeed attract attention. Diana hardly knew whether it was favourable or not. She'd never been anywhere before. She was a little shy, but friendly. She wanted to see the flower markets, walk on the *quais*, take snapshots, climb to Montmartre, catch buses, pat stray dogs. But they spent their time as Vivian chose.

'Walk up those streets? Whatever for?' Between narrow apartment houses, Diana had seen the unlikely Turkish bulges of the *Sacré Cœur*. 'I didn't come here for exercise. Must I remind you that I have a game leg?'

'Oh, my dear, I'm sorry. It was selfish of me. Let's go back and rest.'

'I don't want to rest,' sulked Vivian. 'I just don't fancy country walks. Explore the church if you want to. I've seen it. I used to have some friends at Chantilly. I'll drive over and see if they're still there. Don't be later than seven.'

So Diana went up to the church by herself, and scrambled down through back streets, beside real studios and scruffy kerbside cafés that reminded her a little of the Band Box, and eventually she got tired in her high heels and sat down at a rickety table outside a café, and kicked off her shoes in blessed relief. This was the Paris she'd dreamed of, tawdry and charming, but somehow 'real'. It came as a relief after her round of bars and foyers that were characterless and merely expensive. This place was much too small and shabby for Vivian. She'd hardly touched her iced drink when a young man at the next table bowed and told her he would like to paint her. 'You have a contradictory face, mademoiselle. It is a challenge——'

'Madame,' corrected Diana. She pointed to her ring.

The young man grinned cheerfully. 'Then it's even more of a challenge. You're alone!'

'Only because my husband's gone to Chantilly.'

'Likewise alone?'

'Of course.'

'Of course.' But he clearly didn't believe it. He seemed to think Vivian's absence was his lawful opportunity. He offered Diana loose-packed cigarettes in a carton, pointed out the many landmarks, told her she had beautiful feet (she was vainly trying to find her shoes under the table) and discussed his artistic career at some length. It seemed to consist mostly of studio parties, and borrowing money off his father. The invitation to his studio followed at once.

But with no Vivian to keep an eye on her, Diana felt it would be unwise in the extreme to visit anybody's studio.

Even if you could see all Paris from the window. She shook her head.

'*Mais si.* There is such generosity, such bitterness in your mouth! You are gay as a kitten. Calm as a queen. And then you remember . . . something or other . . . and you are bitter as an unripe almond.'

'Then I'm sure I should be most unsuitable to paint.'

The young man sighed, taking a realistic view of his talents for a moment. 'Perhaps. Perhaps I could not paint you at all. But as a woman—you are still a challenge! *Mon Dieu*, what a mouth. It would be like painting an April day, a playing kitten, a child—you would not hold the pose a moment. No, I would rather tear up my canvas and jump out of the window.' He smiled delightfully. 'It's that top window there, mademoiselle, with the flower-pot and the yellow shutters. Come up and look round!'

'No, thank you.'

'But there's no one there! I don't share with a friend, or keep a model—there.' He dropped his voice. 'We would be alone, you and I. I would throw away my brushes and paint your beauty with my lips—'

'No!' Diana was ready for flight. She'd got her shoes on at last. He was a very nice little man, with a striped jersey like a sailor, but Diana couldn't possibly be responsible for his wasting a canvas or jumping out of the window—if nothing graver happened. And Vivian wouldn't think this sort of interlude funny. Vivian had already spoken of 'arranging' to have her portrait painted. He'd be furious if she precluded his plans by finding an artist who was sympathetic, but probably no good. She paid for her drink and stood up. 'Husband,' she said firmly. '*Mari. Attendre . . . à mon hôtel . . . très jaloux!*'

'*Jaloux?*' He wanted to prolong the game.

'*Oui.*' What a lie, she thought.

He stood up and kissed her hand, and it was the only kiss she got on her honeymoon. '*Au revoir, belle inconnue.*'

Vivian didn't ask her how she'd spent the afternoon. He hadn't been to his friends, and he dined off brandy. 'It's my shoulder,' he complained. 'This damn town's damp. We'll fly to Cannes to-morrow. I've told the manager to find me a masseur. You'd better take yourself to a cinema. Or pack.'

Cannes was Paris over again, as far as Diana was concerned. There was the same fuss at the hotel, flowers in cellophane, changing her clothes and sitting at café tables for hours, while Vivian scraped acquaintances who offered to show them round, smiled a great deal at Diana, and let Vivian pay for the drinks.

'Don't sit there brooding,' Vivian ordered her. 'Do you want the fellow to show you where the perfumes are made, or not? You didn't say two words to him.'

'No. He struck me as a sort of bar fly—or whatever you call them here. I don't suppose he had two francs to rub together.'

'Of course he hasn't. That's why he had to sit and bear your sulking. Don't you realise yet, Diana, that I like talking to people? The more the better. I like playing host, and the fellow's drinks—the poor devil's lunch, which I don't suppose he'll get if I don't invite him—isn't going to wreck the Carter Foundry. I'm not a fool,' Vivian continued smoothly, acknowledging languidly the hotel manager's bow as he passed their table, 'I checked on him at once. Ex-officer. Cavalry. Married to a Frenchwoman. Pension goes farther out here—or it did. Now, do you want to drive out to Grasse, or do you not?'

'Yes, of course.' What else could she say?

'I'll tell him to hire a car and collect us, then.' A sharp attack of arthritis, which started in Paris, kept Vivian from driving, and he loathed being driven. This, then, was a great concession to her pleasure. Diana agreed enthusiastically, swallowed the yawn which was choking her (they had sat the whole morning in a café) and declined another drink, Vivian moved awkwardly in his chair to

signal the waiter. He drank only scotch, whatever it cost.

'Convention requires that a newly married couple go off on a honeymoon,' he explained to her, his eyes sweeping the terrace for possible acquaintances. 'A man in my position spends it abroad. So here we are. It would look better, Diana, if you appeared to be enjoying it.'

'But I am enjoying it. Only——'

'Yes? I'm listening.'

'Only it would be more fun if it was a honeymoon.'

'I didn't come here for fun,' Vivian retorted quietly. 'As a matter of fact, this fortnight away from the people I know, and the places I know, with a dissatisfied young woman, is rather a bore. But I observe conventions, Diana. I would advise you to do the same.'

'Yes, Vivian.' Diana was seething inside. She only realised now that she'd expected the marriage ceremony to work a magic change in Vivian. And it hadn't. He was still polite and distant, considered his opinion on everything better than hers (which it probably was) and assumed that she had the same feelings, or lack of feelings, as himself. It was clear, too, that she was boring him. Fortunately, she saw the danger in time. She turned her brightest smile on him. 'Vivian, I've just had a wonderful idea! If you would like it, naturally. . . .'

'Well?'

She could still command his attention when she smiled. A little of the excitement she forced herself to feel had already infected him. He liked her to ask his opinion, or advice. It tempted her to act less informed than she really was. He'd shown her the Eiffel Tower as if he'd built it personally. When Diana, anxious to please, said she recognised it from a beer label, he was really angry. 'Well?' He was waiting.

'I was just thinking . . . how would it be to ask this Major Prescott and . . . and the man he was talking about, the one who flew the Greek princess out of the revolution, and back to fetch her five dogs . . . and then her fiancé

left him with the dogs and no currency . . . to ask them to dinner? I'm sure he'd be awfully interested to talk planes with you, and you could tell Major Prescott about your racing——'

It was infantile, but it worked. Diana had the measure of Vivian. She must never let him be alone, outside, unimportant. The dinner party—for of course the two adventurers came, and very hungrily they ate—was a great success . . . for Vivian. He talked, and they applauded. With poker-straight faces they told the most outrageous lies, and asked his opinion on impossible mechanical problems. Vivian, unsuspecting, proceeded to give it to them. Diana realised what they were doing, and felt disgusted. Then she saw how much Vivian was enjoying himself, too thick-skinned to feel all that she was feeling for him. After a while she began to yawn and yawn. She couldn't drink round for round with them, she couldn't cap their stories, she didn't want to spoil her husband's evening. Finally she excused herself, and fled upstairs.

Vivian's voice, and his guests' immoderate laughter, followed her. They'd had a lot to drink, and the proprietor, pausing to inquire if they'd enjoyed the meal, was made to sit down and drink with them. And listen to Vivian's dusty triumphs. And the Greek princess. And the dogs.

'Man, I walked back to Bulgaria——' the pilot shouted. Diana heard him clearly as she stood on her cool balcony, her stole round her shoulders, her vivid dress robbed of colour by the moon. She was as still and white as the masonry in the garden below. As bitter as the sea. Her breathing as shallow. 'And there was a Bulgaria in those days, you know! Well, there was I, lost in the mountains, begging food off peasants and not knowing whether they said, Go east, or west. And five blooming dogs with pedigrees as long as a winter night. Hungry and wild as a ruddy wolfpack, they were. I went to a hotel in Sofia—all on tick, I hadn't any money—and said, Give me a room with a bath——'

'Ah, the Englishman and his bath!' That was Prescott's voice. It had thickened perceptibly since the afternoon at Grasse.

'Englishman, nothing! I bathed those five bleeding dogs before ever the princess saw them. Otherwise——' The story ended in shouts of laughter, in which Vivian joined. He had a phenomenal head for liquor, Diana knew.

'There was a revolution in Bulgaria, too. Next day——'

'You must mean Bolivia, old boy. Bol-iv-ia,' warbled Major Prescott happily, breaking into song. 'Bolivia, I love you——' There was a crash, and the manager's voice raised in alarm. And Vivian's voice. 'Shut up!' and a long silence.

Diana stared at the black palms along the world's most expensive beach, the silver lamé sea, the empty road. Her heart was empty, but then it had never been full. Except of vague dreams. The dreams most girls have dissolved in the realities of marriage by the age of thirty. She hadn't lost a lover: only her ideal of a lover. She'd failed to make a romantic lover out of an all-providing husband, that was all. There were other things. There was Alice.

Alice needed her, and the home this ageing, slightly absurd man downstairs could give her, by the accident of his wealth. After all, Vivian asked very little of her, except to admire him . . . and be young.

But I shan't be young for ever, Diana thought at once. Vivian is in his fifties, he must be. In a decade, he won't care so much. If I can look young, for a few more years, everything will be all right. At sixty, he'll need a house-keeper. At seventy, a nurse. When all he thinks about is a hot fire and a glass of milk, he won't care who hands it to him.

Suddenly, she thought of Hendry, and shivered. Hendry was the living lie to his father's youth. What sort of a person was Hendry? Her fleeting impression had been of someone pleasant, but weak. His father had brushed him aside like an importunate boy, and Hendry had let him . . . but he couldn't fail to mind. His father's treatment of him

was ridiculous, and it made him look ridiculous. Perhaps Hendry hated his father. Perhaps he bore him ancient grudges from his childhood. Supposing Vivian dropped dead, and Hendry had to make his widow an allowance? Vivian drank heavily, and was far from fit. Would her presence increase the antagonism between father and son, or could she heal it? What part had Hendry played, if any, in the break-up of his father's last marriage? Who was the former Mrs. Carter, anyway? Diana gripped the balcony till the rough stone hurt her hand. Prinny would know these things. She must go to Prinny.

In the morning, Vivian had a headache. Diana agreed at once it was the change of climate, the hotter sun. Privately, she wondered what Major Prescott and his friend felt like, and if, indeed, they were conscious enough to feel anything at all. She laid her hand on Vivian's forehead, and it did seem hot and dry. She suggested aspirin.

But nothing as simple as aspirin would do—or any other of the bottles and boxes the hypochondriac Vivian travelled furnished with—his dressing-room was more full of balms and unguents than a surgery. A French doctor was called who, learning about the honeymoon, bowed gallantly to Diana, suggested that Vivian was '*un peu surmené*', prescribed something largely herbal, and was prevailed on to take '*un petit verre*' with the patient. With the doctor on one side, and Diana on the other, Vivian's spirits, if not his health, improved. His French and Italian were quite fluent, so that Diana was precluded from the conversation, and could only replenish glasses, and smile. Outside, the sun was shining, and there were glad cries from the beach. Vivian must be a dream patient, she thought, watching the doctor nodding happily at her husband. He tells you what's wrong with him, and then you tell him, and he agrees.

But he was only a dream patient to diagnose, not to nurse. As soon as the doctor had left, he lay back on his pillow, physically exhausted, and in the worst possible

temper. His face looked more cavernous than usual, the eyes sunk and the skin stretched on his prominent cheekbones. His fingers fidgeted nervously through the English papers. He turned his head from side to side like a child with earache.

'I want some tea. Some decent cigarettes. Pull that blind. No—damn you—pull it back again. Talk to me. Read to me. Go down and turn that blasted radio off. . . .' One moment it was 'Don't leave me, Diana.' And the next it was 'Get out of my sight.'

In the end, Diana had a solitary lunch at the hotel (Vivian would eat nothing) and then she sat with him, trying to entertain him, and quite unable to. Talking worried his head, and for once their rôles were reversed. He was prepared to listen, and she had nothing to say.

'Good God, woman, you're in a foreign country for the first time, and you can't even find trivialities to talk about. Go to a cinema, and see a film. Go on to the beach. Swim. Hire a car and go shopping. Surely you can find something to do, and come and tell me about it——'

'Dear Vivian, we haven't all your wonderful gift of making a story out of a simple, everyday happening. I can tell you that the sea is blue, and the cafés are crowded and the sun is hot, but I can't make a story out of it. Besides, you know it all. You've seen it before.' She began playing with her long red nails, wondering if she ought not to move the cigarettes away, and scared of the consequences. Vivian was chain-smoking, and it couldn't be good for him. 'It's not much fun looking at things alone, Vivian. I can't get into conversation with people like you do——'

'I don't see why not,' Vivian argued querulously. 'Nobody's going to kidnap you in the foyer of the hotel. Or steal your jewels. Or blackmail you. I don't mind what you do, as long as you tell me, share it with me——'

'Poor old thing.' Vivian did look so unhappy, with his hatchet face, and his magnificent silk dressing-gown, and pillows stuffed behind his aching shoulder. It wasn't any

fun being ill, and an awful waste of the South of France. He might very well be in bed in London. Hotel rooms were the same, anywhere. The same impersonal comfort, and the expense——

'Stop pitying me—you don't know what it is to be ill,' grumbled Vivian. 'I've only got a few more years left. Downhill years. . . . You're young and strong. You aren't sensitive to suffering. You aren't even sympathetic!' His voice rose angrily. Diana thought he was going to hurl a pillow at her, but he slumped back again. Probably his shoulder had given him another twinge. Or his head was worse. 'Hendry read me some nonsense, once, about a man seeing an angel . . .' he muttered. 'By someone called Baudelaire. . . . D'you know the poem I mean? No, I suppose you don't. You don't know anything. Can't say I've a lot of time for poetry myself—especially French poetry—but it just struck me . . . Things do strike you, when you're caged in a bed, probably dying, with no friends, and only a fool woman with you——' A restless movement upset the cigarettes, and brought a squeal of pain from Vivian.

I suppose I have to take it, and not answer back. Diana bit her lips, and busied herself picking up the cigarettes, and straightening the bed. I could say, It's your own damn fault. Or I could stifle you with one of your own pillows, as the sun is stifling me, having to stay indoors, and put up with your bad temper. In fact, I could strangle you—— No, she couldn't, of course. He was her husband, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health——

'Vivian'—she stood up—'of course I'm worried about you, and sorry you're in pain. If you really want to trace the poem, I'll buy the book, and find out. Or the manager might know, if it's well known——'

'I don't ask you to parade your ignorance in front of a hotel manager——'

'Vivian!'

'Oh, stop gloating about my illness. I'm ill, and you're healthy, and bored stiff with me, and that's the end of it.'

'It isn't—' She was nearly in tears. 'Look, I'll get Major Prescott, and the pilot, and anyone else you like, and we'll have a party, up here, if you feel you'd like it——'

'No! Let strangers see me sick and miserable!' The war-time hero, he couldn't bear small things calmly.

But Diana was Alice-like in her desire to be useful. 'I know I worry you. I can't help being healthy, can I? Look, I'll go for a walk right now, and I will—I WILL—find something to amuse you.' She seized her hat and escaped.

She went straight to the beach and sat on the hot sand facing the sea. Apart from Vivian's discomfort, everything was wonderful, wonderful, except . . . that she had no one to share it with. She wanted to talk, to discuss her hopes and fears, her difficulties with her husband, Alice in far-away England. Again she thought of Prinny. Prinny was the woman friend she'd always wanted. Wise, cheerful, discreet. . . . Diana was already gilding her with qualities, like the dream lover Vivian had failed to incarnate. Prinny was no longer a woman friend, she was the ideal friend. She even envied Alice her company, now

There was no tide, nothing to watch except the glitter, which tired her eyes, and luckier, escorted women—daringly undressed, superbly tanned—the sun-worshippers, a race on their own. A race without birthplace or frontier, the only passport needed being money and leisure. But Diana no more belonged among them than among Mr. Bates' friends. She was lost.

Time passed, people gathered up their things and removed to the terrace of cafés, or drove away in sleek cars. There was no young artist to talk to. Not even any flat stones to play ducks and drakes with.

She went back to Vivian at last, forgetting that she was supposed to have found something amusing to tell him.

'Well?' He was sipping a glass, but he put it down

eagerly. 'I hate being alone. I ought to have got Prescott's number—I suppose he has a number. Well, so you sat on the beach. See anyone?'

'No—I didn't.'

Vivian swore at her. 'Well, get me the town's list of visitors—the hotel has a copy. No, don't go chasing downstairs. Ring for it! Perhaps the Dalbys are here. . . . Or old Barchester.'

'I—I did talk to a young man on the beach,' Diana began desperately. 'I didn't think you'd mind. He was . . . tall. He had a striped vest like a sailor. And . . . he admires you very much!'

'Good Lord. Who was it? English?'

'Yes, of course. He's an artist—he said something about painting me——' Poor Diana's powers of invention were not very great, and it had been necessary to transfer the young man from Montmartre wholesale, but it was dreadful to see Vivian, alert at once, mentally flipping through his vast acquaintance to place him.

'Couldn't possibly be Jack Muspratt, old Muspratt's nephew? Lives on a boat round these parts. He paints, I think. I didn't know he was still here——'

'Yes, that's him. He mentioned his uncle——'

'Well'—Vivian beamed at her from his pillows, enchanted with the prospect of a new face—'why ever didn't you say so? You should have brought him back with you. Fancy that, old Muspratt's nephew! I must remember to tell him.'

'I couldn't bring him here——' Diana was lying wildly now. 'He said . . . he had to go back to his boat at once. He hopes you'll be better——'

'What? You told him I was ill? I'm not ill. I'm never ill. Tired, exhausted, laid low by their beastly foreign cooking——' (This from Vivian, the gourmet, the lover of all high and rare dishes.) 'That boy'll tell Muspratt, who'll tell everyone at the club——'

'Vivian, stop! I didn't say a word. About being ill, I mean. I just said you were tired . . . with packing.' One

of Vivian's complaints was that he was helpless without his man, a sort of confidential valet he'd had for years. 'He didn't think you were ill—really he didn't.'

Vivian simmered down, grumbling. Disappointed of seeing Jack Muspratt, yet unwillingly for the young man to catch him sick in bed, he blamed only Diana. Complaints, like the aftermath of a volcano, reached her in dribbles as she dressed.

'Vivian'—she came to the door of her room in her new stiff scarlet house-robe, which was more gorgeous than any evening coat she'd seen in the shops, and rather scratchy—'I'll stay here with you. I don't want any dinner. In any case, I don't want to dine alone.'

'Oh, what's the good of your staying up here, too? Go down and eat. And look at the register for new arrivals. Here—d'you remember that very tall man you saw on the car park? A Scot, you thought? It might be old Jack Caudle. See if you can find him again—he'll know my name.'

Diana, her own head aching, went down and span out her solitary meal. The only new arrivals were a Mr. and Mrs. Brown, of Huddersfield, and the tall man, when challenged, said he came from Montreal. His manner indicated he'd never heard of Vivian and didn't want to. Diana excused herself, feeling a perfect fool.

Vivian got up the next day, but he couldn't drive a car or walk far. He spent most of his time crouched at a table strategically placed for watching the door, his face the colour of old leather, drumming his fingers. Like a hungry spider, Diana thought miserably. Then she was ashamed of herself. His leg, his shoulder, his lack of importance here and friends—she felt it all as keenly as he did. But whereas he allowed himself a filthy temper, she must be gay and interesting as she sat beside him.

Their last day came, and she wasn't sorry. Vivian (he kept on saying it) was sick of 'abroad' and he knew the Riviera coast like the back of his hand. If only he'd been

able to drive. Or brought Abel, his man. Or waited for the Dalbys, who always rented a villa. . . . He wasn't well, and Diana felt the sooner they were home the better for both of them.

But where was 'home'? It was a question that Alice had asked, long ago, and when Diana ventured to repeat it, Vivian said mildly, 'Oh, I bought a house through my agents the week before we married. In Hampshire—I have connections there. I imagine you'll be satisfied.'

'Bought it—already?' Gone were her dreams of house-hunting together, just the two of them, in the car. The intimacy of discovery and defeat. The agents stormed, the lunches in village pubs, the triumph of finding a home at last. It was to be the web securing the loose warp of their relationship. Now this. 'Well . . . we must furnish it.'

'It is furnished. By Harrods. I'm not going to scrap everything because you don't like it. I won't throw money away on a silly whim. Hendry made a few alterations—and I must admit he has taste, even if he does read poetry and lives in a pokey little flat near the foundry.'

'A ready-made home. Nothing more to do——'

'Yes. Convenient, isn't it? By the way, I've arranged for Alice to go straight from Prinny's to her school.'

'All right . . . but she needs clothes. Uniform.'

'Prinny's coping. I told her to.' Vivian put his lean fingers on her wrist, hurting her with his urgency. 'You see, Diana, I would like to be the first person in your life, your prime concern. Prinny enjoys being useful to all sorts of people, and I enjoy my wife's undivided attention. Is it clear?'

It was more than clear, it was blatant. Diana made a slight sign of acknowledgment and concerned herself with his packing, since he was so helpless without his man. Oh, she wouldn't do it as well as Abel, a dried little nut of a man. She knew that. But as Vivian had brought a trousseau that rivalled hers, and took a great deal longer to dress, matching a tie or handkerchief to his mood, and

dropping those rejected on the floor, it was time someone started.

She found her marriage lines in one case, folded as she'd handed them back to him in the vestry of St. Agnes. Vivian was having a bath, so she took them out to read again. The name and address—she remembered those. And his age, given in vanity as forty-nine. And something else. His status was described as 'formerly married to Priscilla Lunt Carter, who divorced him'.

CHAPTER V

DIANA returned from her unsatisfactory honeymoon with her new husband, loyally and even grimly determined to make the best of things, for Alice's sake. She had been banking enormously on Prinny's friendship and understanding, and to find that Prinny herself had been the last Mrs. Carter was an unpleasant shock. Diana felt cheated. Cheated by her parents, for dying inconveniently. Cheated by poor old Tim. By Vivian, for not being responsive to love. By Prinny, for having discarded Vivian. Not even the new house, the new clothes, the prestige of being Vivian's wife, could make up for her loss.

They flew back from Nice to London, and Diana unwisely tackled Vivian about his previous marriages in the aircraft. Vivian felt under no obligation to account for himself.

'You might have told me—I feel awfully silly.' Her face was hard and white, as the Goldbergs' ruder customers had seen it.

'Good Lord, woman—I didn't conceal it. It's on your marriage certificate. You can read, can't you? I've often talked of Prinny to you. It was you said you wanted to be friends—'

'You ought to have told me.' Diana was obstinate.

'I am under no obligation to tell you anything. It's in the past. I assumed you were sufficiently civilised to accept a man's past, without raking it over. If it's money that worries you, I don't support her—or the boy. Prinny refused me that pleasure.'

'Boy? You're not talking about Hendry, are you?'

Vivian slewed round in his seat to face her. The aeroplane bore them relentlessly northwards, to their unseen,

ready-made home, and all its obligations. To the years of their shared life. From bitter hours in a luxury setting to—what? A hostess offered them coffee, and they scowled at her, interrupted. Diana's face was a stone. Vivian's an African mask, carved deep to grotesqueness, blackish.

'I get tired of explaining twice, so try and listen. Hendry is my son and heir. Prinny removed her boy from me absolutely, so I absolutely renounced him. Henceforward he is not my son, and for me he has ceased to exist.'

'Renounced him? Oh, how completely biblical. People don't do those sort of things——' It was like saying, Never darken my doorstep again! 'You mean, you actually have two sons?' She'd been sure there was a schoolboy, all along.

'I have one son.' Vivian was obstinate. 'I keep on telling you.'

'No, you have two——'

'I have one, Diana.'

'Then Prinny's was by a previous marriage?'

'Prinny was not previously married. The child was born of our marriage. Prinny had so little opinion of me as a father that she removed herself and the boy. She even changed his name to hers. You will please me greatly by not referring to the matter again.' Vivian closed his eyes, as if to emphasise that he had closed the matter. Diana was left to readjust her ideas as best she could.

Alice had, all unwittingly, been left with Vivian's ex-wife, who wished to be her friend, and would doubtless be invaluable over handling Vivian, but with whom she could never feel completely at ease, completely confident. . . . She could never ask, for instance, Why did you REALLY divorce him? Was it his vanity, or some more serious reason? Did you fall in love with someone else? Did he? And the boy—the boy who had been the subject of so much bitterness that he no longer bore his father's name, lived at his cost, or ever saw him? The boy who was Alice's companion, now . . . Diana knew her Alice. Alice had longed for a brother, and had doubtless constituted

herself this boy's adoring slave and admirer already, unwittingly siding against her mother and Vivian in the family rift. She only hoped he was a decent boy—Alice was terribly impressionable. Perhaps he was so brilliant that Hendry, the first-born, was jealous? Or already a knave, that his father was ashamed of him? There were so many questions. Diana sieved them slowly through her aching mind. Beside her, Vivian, cause of so much trouble, slept quietly.

The house was called Sawley Lodge. It stood in its own grounds which, in the agent's jargon, were largely in a natural state. It was 'the house of the village of Sawley Mill', a straggling street of Victorian labourers' cottages, with a sub-post office, a pub and a horse drinking-trough for its centre. The village connected with the main Portsmouth road south of Fleet, a part of the world Diana scarcely knew but where Vivian had, as he said, a few connections. That meant other couples who lived in similar isolated houses, with too large gardens, too few servants, and put a good face outward. The men went in for the heavier kinds of sport (working the huge garden was mostly the woman's job) and the women wore tweeds magnificently, and played golf. Diana, who neither rode horses nor played golf or bridge, never felt at home with them, although as she'd explained to the patient Alice, they were really 'her' kind of people.

Vivian's car had been brought to the airport, and whatever it cost him, he insisted on driving it himself. They went straight to Fleet, where the faithful Abel waited and a local woman had been engaged for the cleaning. Vivian drove expertly. He hardly spoke a word. Diana's thoughts and comments piled up unvoiced as she sat beside him, watching the road.

'I hope you'll like your new home.' It was stilted, perhaps, but civil. Diana was quick to respond.

'I'm sure I shall. I trust implicitly in your choice.'

'I've told you. Harrods did the furnishing—except for

a few bits, which Hendry threw out. I believe he added a few.'

'I hope I'll be able to make you happy there.'

'Make me comfortable, please, and don't concern yourself with my happiness. I require people round me—lots of people—not the efforts of any particular person.'

'So I begin to understand.' Diana was already realising that marriage for Vivian meant simply 'an alternative, practised every so often, to living at his club. But to-day she wouldn't think about Vivian, or her disappointment. She'd think about Alice, and running the house, finding herself friends and interests. She'd salvage something from the wreck of her dreams. She wouldn't be hopelessly dependent, like Vivian. Perhaps he'd let her have some interest in the Carter Foundry—welfare, or something. She said as much.

'Welfare work is done by trained people, with a degree in social science. Staff selection is likewise a trained job. Your job is my home, Diana. My comfort. Entertaining my friends. I can't think you'll ever set foot inside the foundry.'

Another snub, but she was getting used to them, now. Vivian had let her into certain watertight compartments of his life only. The others he guarded jealously. For whom, she wondered? And she thought of Prinny.

They passed through a village where a coloured play-bill had been nailed to an oak tree. Somebody's Revels at the village hall. Just local talent. It sounded fun.

'Oh, Vivian, I'm going to join the local dramatic society. If there isn't one, I'll found one! Will you come and applaud? We could do it in aid of the local hospital. Or children——'

'I don't quite understand what you mean.'

'I'm talking about acting. I was always cast in the school play, and I think it's great fun producing. But probably they have something in Fleet. . . .' Her enthusiasm dropped at his no-response.

'Do I understand you want to turn the village hall into

a rural Band Box? And you want my patronage while you put on a song-and-dance act for the benefit of the locals?' Vivian's hands tightened on the wheel. 'I'm afraid it's out of the question!'

She asked in amazement why?

'Because you are now Mrs. Carter of Sawley Lodge, for one thing. Your time and energies will be taken up with our entertaining, if you do your job properly.'

'But I have a right to friends . . . to interests of my own

'Do control yourself. That's better. . . . Local people and the wives of my friends will call. You can give them tea and gossip. You might ride, or have some golf lessons. I'm afraid that my leg prevents me from accompanying you.'

It was a heavy, grey evening, not yet dark, but with a suspicion of thunder. The green along the hedgerows was dusty already, and top-heavy. The road was navy blue in the evening light, and dead straight. They passed cars, but no people. The villages seemed shut. Diana wondered where everybody was. A church bell began tolling as they passed by. Like a tocsin, she thought, shivering.

They turned, suddenly, through iron gates, and the road became worse. Vivian set his lips, denying his aching shoulder, nursing his car over the worst of the bumps. The road turned again, and the house was in front of them. Vivian, who had a good sense of the theatre, stopped.

'Sawley Lodge—Mrs. Vivian Carter. I trust you two will be able to make something of each other.' Was it her imagination, or was he being deliberately sarcastic? She didn't acknowledge the introduction, and he drove on towards the front steps.

It was a small Victorian mansion, not unpleasing, except for a peculiar excrescence of a turret at one end. The turret caught Diana's eye at once. What a play-room for Alice, with its dozen narrow windows commanding all ways.

Vivian thought she was appalled at the garden. 'A

shambles,' he agreed, 'but that can be remedied. We'll have lawns, and a few formal beds, and I imagine that wall hides the kitchen gardens—but it's your department. Arrange it how you like. . . . Ghastly tower, isn't it? When I saw the photographs, I said, Knock that down. But Hendry made a fuss. Calls the thing "*fin de siècle*" and says it'll look like a workhouse, otherwise. I might find a use for the room. Keep tackle in, or make a study.' They were feeling their way on soft new gravel, on which the angry red brick of the house threw an orange tinge. 'I thought you could have those rooms, over the front door.'

Diana swallowed. 'What about the servants?'

'You ought to be able to manage with four or five.'

How on earth was she to find work for so many people—if they stayed? The house looked compact from the outside. She could imagine a cook and a gardener, perhaps, but five people . . . indoors. 'Do we really need five?'

'My dear, you may imagine I bought this place entirely to provide your daughter with a home, but I confess I was selfishly thinking of my social life. There are five guest rooms, but they only accommodate eight people.' He stopped the car at the front door and sat there, waiting.

Abel, who must have been watching for them, immediately ran down the steps, his ancient face convulsed in a leer of welcome.

'Good evening, sir. And welcome to Sawley! There's been Sir Roderick and the Pony Club on the phone all day, wanting you to dine . . . and Mrs. Lunt, too. Oh; good evening, madam. A pleasant journey, I hope?'

Well, thought Diana grimly, I am a woman of no importance, that's clear. The valet just notices me—after some man and the Pony Club and Mrs. Lunt. Mrs. Lunt? What does she want with Vivian? She followed her husband into the pleasant but impersonal house, remembering how she'd once imagined him carrying her over the threshold, a bride into her home. Only it wasn't a home at all—it

was a collection of rooms from a housing exhibition. Vivian went straight to the telephone, leaving Diana to find her room.

It was a gracious room, furnished in the rust red and white she loved, and it added to her annoyance that she couldn't better it by moving anything. The furniture was already placed in the best possible position. If she altered so much as a footstool, it looked wrong. In fact, tilting up a small, rust satin chair, she saw chalked on the bottom 'Mrs. C.'s room. L.H. window, L. of dresser' like a careful stage direction. So that's Hendry, she thought, impressed. He must have thought a lot about my room. And how did he know I liked just that shade of red?

They dined alone, that night. Diana wore a heavy hostess gown of cream-coloured watered silk, which ill became her tense white face. But it was something she'd chosen herself, despite Vivian's protests that it didn't suit her. It was at least a gesture of independence, even if it meant emptying cases to find apricot powder and sun-tan lipstick to wear with it. She had no jewellery, having given it all back to Vivian for safety. Her tight sleeves and long skirts suggested a wedding dress.

Abel served them as they sat at either end of a long narrow refectory table, absurd for two people. They ate little, both smoking heavily, and Vivian opened wine for Diana, and chose whisky for himself. Up and down the table, they made polite conversation. About the weather, and their flight, and how nice it was to be home. . . . Diana was bored stiff. Limited in their interests as Vivian's friends were, she began to wish them peopling the long table that separated her from her husband.

Vivian, a distinguished stranger in evening clothes, spoke mostly to Abel, and eventually got up and turned on the radio. Across a burst of music that made Diana's feet itch to dance, he tossed his first remark to her. 'Prinny was on the phone to-night.'

'So I gathered.' Well, need he wonder if her voice was dry? Just whom was he married to—Prinny or herself?

He raised his eyebrows at her tone. 'Your infant has the measles, if you're interested. She asked to speak to you, but knowing how hysterical you get——'

Diana dropped the fork on which she had impaled a selection of Abel's salad, like an African necklace.

'Alice ill? Midge ill? I'll speak to her at once.'

'I told her you'd phone in the morning. The child's asleep now, and a doctor's looking after her. She wrote to you when it started——'

'I never got it.' There had been no letter lately from Prinny, which coincided with her own discovery of Prinny's real status.

'Yes, I have it here. At least, I have it upstairs. She writes in detail of the child's spots, and treatment. Hardly ideal for a honeymoon, was it?'

'She wrote to me?'

'Of course. You can hardly expect me to follow Alice's symptoms with the same emotion——'

'My letter? And you kept it?'

'Because you get so hysterical. I wanted my packing done, and my journey in peace. The child isn't dying——'

The servant came back with a dish of fruit, serving Diana first, naturally, but never taking his eyes from his master's face. Diana swallowed the rest of what she'd been going to say to Vivian. She was trapped, trapped. Disappointed, cheated, trapped! Her husband would interfere whenever he wanted to, read her letters, veto her friends, choose her pursuits as he chose her clothes—~~for~~ amuse himself. She finished the meal in silence, white with rage and helpless. Abel found her thumbing feverishly through the phone book—she would not have the humiliation of asking Vivian for Prinny's number—and murmured that the personal numbers were already written out on the pad. Prinny was under L, of course—so far the only entry. It angered Diana further that Prinny should be a 'personal' number, whatever Abel meant by that, and that a servant should point it out. Then she forgot everything in her anxiety over Alice. Prinny, friendly

and helpful as ever, had difficulty in understanding her.

'Yes, measles. . . . No, don't worry. Diana, don't panic. Honestly. . . . Well, I have informed you. Tomorrow? Yes, do. She's asleep, now. Oh, who knows where kids get measles from? For Pete's sake, don't cry—'

But Diana was already crying. Sobbing, choking helplessly, scared and defeated and outraged. And it was not entirely for Alice, it was for herself, and the mess she'd made of her life.

There were compensations, of course, and Diana set out to make the most of them. There was the running of her new home, the garden to be created out of a wilderness, Alice to welcome (her illness having made school impossible for half a term), her neighbours to entertain—and it mattered terribly to her to be liked by her women neighbours, whatever their age and dress. First and foremost of the neighbours was Mrs. Corrie, wife of a retired colonel. Mrs. Corrie had no money at all, but enough personality to be accepted in the neighbourhood without it. Whether she was liked was another matter. She bounced up to Diana on her first day at Sawley, introduced herself, and begged a subscription for her Girls. What her Girls had or did, Diana never found out.

She was in the garden, craning up at the summer sky, trying to determine whether the attic windows needed white curtains, and whether more curtains made the house look inhabited, or the rooms darker, and when she looked round, Mrs. Corrie was beside her. A shrewd little weasel of a woman, in several shades of tired oatmeal, with hair like a swan's nest, and two terriers at her heels. A woman, Diana knew at once, that she could never afford as an enemy.

'Good morning,' said the stranger, in a voice as clipped as a military moustache, 'I'm Bessie Corrie, your neighbour. We live at Sawley Cottage. No drains. Tiresome.

And you're the new Mrs. Carter. Welcome to Sawley Mill—I hope you enjoy country life. You'd better—there isn't much else.'

Diana shook the dry, seamed hand and asked the stranger into the house. 'Do come in and have some coffee with me—or a drink——'

'Coffee? No, can't touch it. Drink? Can't afford it. I'm after your money, m'dear. I came hoping you'd give me a cheque for my Girls——'

It was only after Diana had written a cheque (the first in her new book, and made it out to Bessie Corrie, and crossed it A/C Girls) that the conversation proceeded.

'Golf? No. Bridge? No. You'd better learn to play bridge. The colonel and his sister and I are sick of dummy. . . .' She looked shrewdly at Diana with her beady, black eyes. 'Or perhaps you have other interests? Theatres, dancing, you're young enough to have children. Oh, well, thanks for the cheque. Come along, boys——' She called her dogs out of the long grass, and plodded away without a backward glance.

Diana was disturbed. Vivian had chosen to live in the country, but he had no idea of living with the other people who lived in the country. He despised them, even, Diana found, his own connections. He wouldn't bother to learn bridge, or turn up at church, or visit old Colonel Corrie, or stand the landlord a pint at the local. Diana would pay for these lapses, she knew. But she couldn't make Vivian see it, and at first, there was nothing to see.

Sawley Lodge was soon nicknamed Dr. Barnardo's—for it closed its doors to none. Vivian was surrounded by people—insulated, Diana thought at times—and consequently good tempered. They were mostly people who wanted jobs, or a week-end in the country, or introductions to someone else, and willing enough to flatter Vivian to get them. Their laughter filled the house, their dirty plates piled up in the kitchens, and their cars were parked nose to tail along the drive. They came from everywhere—except locally. That was what worried Diana. The village was

glad enough to see the Lodge sold at last, and to rich people, but socially speaking, Sawley Mill held its hand and waited.

Vivian was perfectly happy. He pressed his friends to bring their friends, and they did so. The same faces that had appeared at her wedding, appeared again, attached to bodies in other clothes, and Diana quickly learned their names. The fourth wife! She couldn't forget it, and she thought people looked at her amused or askance. The village, obscurely resenting her beauty, and her good luck in finding a rich husband, repeated it to themselves *ad nauseam*. But Vivian was so often congratulated that she felt as far as looks were concerned, she probably led the field.

Prinny good humouredly insisted on being her friend, so despite her embarrassment, Diana gave in. Only there wasn't that intimacy between them that she longed for. Vivian was such a peculiar man that she had to talk about him to someone. Eventually she talked to Alice, not realising, then, that Alice retailed everything *verbatim* to Prinny.

Alice was soon better, and Prinny had had her work cut out to keep the infectious child from the still convalescent Hal. The two young invalids (they still hadn't met) were intrigued by the mystery surrounding the other, and talked for hours on the internal telephone system that Hal had abandoned years ago as a babyish present. Prinny made a good story out of her own discomfort.

'My dears, there was I running a shuttle service of books and puzzles from one end of the house to the other—spraying everything, including Connie and myself—every time we went near the poor child. I've lost a stone.'

'It suits you, darling.' Diana was sure Vivian called Prinny Darling to annoy her. He seemed to encourage Prinny, while issuing the curtest of orders to Diana. What Diana didn't realise was that she knuckled under to Vivian and resented it, and Prinny clashed with him every time, taking victory or defeat with the same good humour.

Prinny said loyally, 'Diana looks like a greyhound with-

out trying. She wouldn't know what a foundation garment was.'

Alice, who was listening, nudged her mother. 'Did you say Vivian wore corsets?' She giggled. 'With suspenders on? How funny!'

Diana hushed her, alarmed—as always—at the repetition of her own confidence. Fortunately, Vivian was engaged in paying off some private score against Prinny. Lean himself, he reminded her sadly of her girth and grey hair. Prinny just grinned and reminded him of his own subterfuges. 'We can't all look twenty-five, you know. And Hendry dates you.'

Hendry had telephoned his father several times, and appeared once at lunch, and Diana had said something pleasant about his taste and trouble in furnishing the house. Hendry, watching Vivian sideways, had dismissed the subject modestly, and inquired how she liked the neighbourhood. Vivian took over the conversation at that point, and Diana had time to decide that she'd have to be very bored indeed to work up an affection for Hendry. He had a weak, pink mouth and little white teeth, and being the spit of Vivian, was not unattractive. But he was negative, echoing every opinion of Vivian's instead of challenging them, which Diana always felt like doing.

She wondered if Prinny disliked him very much, and if he in turn disliked his young stepbrother. Occasionally she wondered about the stepbrother. She hadn't met Hal and had only Alice's generous account to go on. He was handsome, clever, marvellous—the most marvellous person in the world. He had a motor bike. He could talk French, do maths. He shaved once a week, had an Irish setter which obeyed him and could open doors. . . . It was a biased account, obviously.

Once, she got as far as saying to Prinny, 'I gather Vivian has nothing to do with your boy, nowadays.'

'Hal? No, he hasn't.'

'Isn't that rather unsatisfactory—from the child's point of view—don't you think?'

'I think Hal's well rid of Vivian. And of Hendry.' There was a finality in her voice which discouraged Diana from any further gathering.

They hadn't been at Sawley Mill a month when Vivian suddenly decided he was rustivating, and they must go up to Town at once. They arrived in the first hot weather of the year, which dispersed most of Vivian's friends into the country. The telephone was ringing at Sawley Lodge, to announce arriving friends, while Vivian, fuming, was sitting alone in his hotel. Diana had escaped to her hair-dresser's.

'London's empty. I can't find a soul I know——'

'Paris was empty, when we got there. Don't you remember? I'm sure if you wait a bit somebody will turn up.' Keeping Vivian in friends was worse than keeping ice in a long drink on a hot day.

'But I don't like waiting——'

'I'm afraid you'll have to. Look, I've bought this stuff to make Alice a dress. How do you like it?' But Vivian's interest in clothes was restricted to adult clothes.

'I don't know. It looks all right—for Alice.'

'Fix me a drink, will you? A long one. . . . Where are we going to-night?'

They went to a night-club, of course. It had all the trappings of the Band Box, which had since closed down (Diana quite expected to be welcomed to a table by her former employer, in a new job). There was a too-small dance floor, dim pink lighting which flattered the women and made Vivian look quite young, and the thick smell of food and perfume and smoke. She wore patterned brocade, of Vivian's choosing. A dress to be painted in, rather than dance. She said as much.

'My dear, you forget. I can't dance.'

Impulsively, she touched his hand. 'I didn't mean really dance. . . . I was generalising. I'd rather sit with you——'

'No, no. You dance. I'd like you to.'

'But I don't know anyone here.'

'I'll soon fix that.'

'I'd rather sit with you and watch.'

'But I want you to dance, Diana. If no one asks you, I shall feel slighted. My pleasure is vicarious, like my dancing. But through you I'm young again, sought after, admired.'

What a philosophy for an intelligent man, Diana thought, withdrawing her hand. And then the idea stepped out of the back of her mind, where she always pushed it: but is Vivian an intelligent man? Like most people, she was impressed with his tremendous façade. Unlike most people, she'd tried to get behind it. What was behind it? A curiously empty room, through which draughts blew and old webs drifted.

Before she'd finished frightening herself with an analysis of Vivian, she was dancing with one of his acquaintances. A very correct and square young man, introduced to her simply as Bilberry. The dance wasn't very enjoyable, but she knew Vivian was watching her, so she made a show of enjoying it.

'Mr. Bilberry's a very solid young man,' she murmured to her husband, when released from her partner's toes and his hot and powerful hands. 'Shall we ask him to our table—and you could talk to him?' She didn't want to be invited again.

'Bilberry of Polzeath,' Vivian corrected. 'One doesn't usually call a peer Mister. No, Diana, I don't think we'll invite him. It would be difficult to discuss my antique triumphs with a young man who only climbs mountains. . . . I confess I have no head for heights. However, he's a member of one of my clubs, and I have no objection to your dancing with him. Ah, here he comes again.'

So Diana pretended to enjoy a second dance with the peer who only climbed mountains, and who danced as if he wore climbing boots still. Talk was difficult.

'Do you climb many mountains, Lord Bilberry?' It sounded stupid as she said it. 'Often, I mean?'

'No. Only Wednesdays and Saturdays.'

She thought it was a snub. Weeks later, she read that he worked in a store, and his training was restricted to two afternoons a week. Inadequate briefing by Vivian was always tumbling her into social pits like that.

'Do you often come here?' inquired her partner suddenly. For no apparent reason he'd turned bright pink.

'No.' Diana tried not to sound thankful. 'We live in the country, you see. Well, it was a lovely dance. Good-bye.'

When she returned to Vivian, the table next to theirs had been vacated and taken again by four men known to him. He turned in his chair to talk to them, no longer requiring her to dance for him, or even her company. She was not even included in the conversation. She had to ask the waiter for a light. . . . Vivian ordered champagne for all six of them, but Diana had already had enough. She examined the other tables at leisure. How pleasant if some freak chance brought an acquaintance of hers, such as Captain Kendall, to dance with her. But of course there was no such chance. In the end, one of Vivian's friends, who'd been trying to catch her eye for quite a time, stood up and asked her to dance.

'Thanks, I'd love to. . . . May I, Vivian?'

He waved her away as a Roman an importuning slave.

Her partner held her closer than necessary and breathed drink and bonhomie all over her. Diana returned to her table and raised a glass to cover a yawn.

There were two catastrophes in Diana's married life, and the first, which should have been laughed off as a joke, happened on their return to Sawley Mill from their week in town. Vivian, who'd driven off in the morning, rang her to say he was bringing three or four men to lunch.

Diana hurried into the kitchen to consult the cook. The cook, a competent, elderly woman, who disliked Abel, was nowhere to be seen. Nor was the parlourmaid, nor the

upstairs girl. The butler was not in his pantry. The kitchens had been left anyhow. The new cookers were encrusted with grease, a triangle burned on the table with a careless iron. The larder was open, the stores unlocked. It was mid-morning, and the kitchen should have been a hive of activity. Diana hurried through the house, and eventually discovered Mrs. Coombs, the local woman, brewing tea for herself and the gardener.

'Mrs. Coombs, where is everyone? What's happened?'

The woman looked at her, between pity and dislike. 'Gorn. That's where they are—gorn.' She hoped Diana noticed she didn't call her Ma'am.

'Gone where?' Diana could only think of Vivian's guests.

'Walked out. I heard 'em talking. Not that it was my business, only I couldn't help it, seeing they didn't trouble to lower their voices. Too far from London, and too much entertaining, I gathered. And no pleasing Captain Carter. Not but they wouldn't have stayed if you'd offered 'em . . .' She made the gesture of rubbing thumb and index finger. 'It was Mr. Stokes and Cook decided 'em. Gwladys was crying, because of her mother, and having to go all the way to Wales to-night. May didn't care—she's local. She'll probably come back, if I have a word with her. Me, I don't mind obliging—I ain't proud. But I got to go at twelve punctual, on account of Mr. Coombs' dinner.' She stopped for breath, vigorously stirring her cooling tea. The gardener, who'd listened intrigued, was blowing on his. Nobody gave Diana a cup. 'Makes it difficult, don't it?' Mrs. Coombs insisted with relish.

Diana Kimmidge, who dealt successfully with the rapacious Goldbergs, might have dealt with her staff in a way they understood. Diana Carter, concerned only with Vivian, and her own frustration, had been blissfully unaware of their discontent. 'I'm not having that May back at any price.' She left the disappointed Mrs. Coombs, and stood in the middle of the kitchen, thinking.

It was twenty past eleven, Mrs. Coombs couldn't stay, it

was Abel's day off, and there was nobody to help her. And Vivian was expected in an hour's time, with guests. Guests she'd never met (since Vivian had indicated they were casual acquaintances), guests she'd probably never see again. At least they were men—men wouldn't notice a domestic hitch the way women do. Diana rolled up her sleeves. 'Midge,' she called, 'Midge! Stop playing and give me a hand.'

In a short time Alice was carefully laying the polished table, her tongue gripped between her small white teeth in concentration. Big knife, little knife, forks, plate. . . . She even added a touch of her own. Table napkins folded in a complex octagon. Prinny had shown her. 'Look!'

'Well . . . all right. But Vivian likes everything plain and gleaming. Quick, polish that fork. And make the mustard fresh.' She started back to the kitchen.

'May never made it fresh. She only turned it over. She only thought of boys. Prinny said she was a slut.'

'Prinny said . . . ? Prinny criticised my servants?'

'Oh, she said you'd get wise to it soon enough. And you have! Mummy, I'm *glad* they've all gone. I think this is *fun*.' She dropped her voice to a conspirator's whisper. 'I wish Mrs. Coombs would go, too. She tells tales. She said I was a fly in your ointment. There!'

'She said—what?' What have I been doing this last month, Diana was asking herself feverishly. Have I been deaf as well as blind?

'A fly in your ointment. You know, yours and Vivian's. But I don't mind. Prinny said I was always welcome in her house. I wish you and I could go to Prinny's house together! You could meet Hal, and the Siamese cats, and——'

The telephone broke this interesting discussion. As there was no longer any Stokes, Diana answered it herself. Mrs. Corrie wanted her to take a stall at the village fête. 'Dear me, your butler isn't ill, is he?' She missed nothing.

'I'll let you know about the stall, later. I expect we can do something, but I'm busy just now.' Diana rang

off. Something Alice had said awoke a memory in her mind. 'My wife . . . Siamese cats . . . at the time of our estrangement.' Oh, well, she might have guessed, she supposed. She picked up Gwladys' forgotten apron and cleared the kitchen table. The store-room was untidy, but well stocked. In a short time she was making pastry and humming an old Band-Box tango.

Mrs. Coombs, telling Mr. Coombs over his lunch, said, 'Well, I thought she'd cry her eyes out, or try and bribe me to stay, I really did. . . . But no! Milady gets the meal herself. You could see there was no staff where she grew up. Independence is all very well, but I like doing for them as is used to being done for! I got me place in the community to think of!' It was in the pub and the post office and even the school by lunch-time, and Mrs. Corrie heard it over tea.

'I hear young Mrs. Carter at the Lodge is having trouble with her staff! Another cup of tea, Vicar? Of course, the Coombs woman ought to be shot, the way she speaks of her.'

The vicar had no more humour than Vivian Carter. 'Shoot almost my only remaining parishicener? Even if she does come mainly for the outing. My dear lady, no! If people like Captain and Mrs. Carter would give the example. . . . Two lumps, please. Thank you.'

Vivian had arrived at half past one, bringing only four guests. Alice, briefed by her mother, whispered that Diana had been called out, and the meal must be a stag one. Vivian was too surprised to speak, but he looked his disapproval. 'And I'm waiting at table—it's part of my training.'

'Oh—er—very well. Run along.' Vivian wanted Diana, because she was decorative, but he certainly didn't want Alice. And he'd brought his guests to talk cars. Drinks were laid out in the library, and he served them himself. Then Diana and Alice, giggling in the kitchen, heard him ring for lunch.

'That's your cue, Midge. Off you go.'

'Oh, Mummy, I'm nervous.'

'He won't look at you. He never does.'

Vivian didn't look at her. The guests were settling into their seats as she hurried round with soup plates, holding her breath. If she hadn't been so nervous, she'd have enjoyed it vastly. She could hardly wait to tell Prinny. Two of the men never noticed who served them at all. The Earl of Clanratchet, elderly, polite and chinless, saw a little girl of eleven and because he didn't expect to see a little girl, assumed he'd punished Vivian's sherry too heavily. He pushed away his glass in alarm. It was wonderful how old Carter stood it, at his age. . . . The other two were busy talking to Vivian and the fourth guest, a young racing driver, noticed nothing remarkable till Diana, in a dark dress and a frilly apron, served the main course. Vivian had his back to her when she came in. He helped himself without recognising her hands, with his own ring on them.

Old Clanratchet, looking up from his plate, wanted to say something about the pretty waitress and didn't like to, in case she was another mistake, like the little girl he thought he'd seen. The young driver, neither drunk nor gullible, followed her every movement till their eyes met and she gave him a wink that returned him, blushing, to his plate.

Not till Vivian said, 'We'll have coffee in the library, Gwladys. Send Stokes to me——' because he wanted a particular brandy, did he look up. He was too good a host to betray his anger publicly, but Diana knew that look. She carried out her tray with hands that trembled. In vain she'd hoped that Vivian would thank her for saving the day. Vivian had no sense of humour, and she'd been crazy to expect it.

She took the coffee in herself. Alice was eating her lunch at the kitchen table, by then. 'Stokes has left,' she murmured. 'If you want the '75, give me the key.' He handed her the cellar keys, and his blackest scowl.

All the men were by now more or less conscious of the pretty girl waiting on them, and had no idea why their host was obviously in a filthy temper. Two of them put it down to his drinking too much, one to his own drinking, and Roderick Ackerman, the racing baronet, decided that old Carter was sweet on the girl, and it was a pretty ropey do, after his umpteenth marriage last month, and what the hell was Mrs. Carter thinking of, to allow it? His sympathies were entirely with Gwladys, and the memory of her wink warmed him like wine.

Lunch was so late that the whole of the afternoon had gone before the guests left, Clanratchet crouched over the wheel of his little Austin as if he were on the stickiest part of a Continental rally. 'I wonder he doesn't wear goggles!' Ackerman patted the sleek bonnet of his Bentley, as earlier Ackermans had patted their horses. 'Thanks for everything, Carter. Nice place you've got here.' He drove out slowly, his eyes drawn towards what was obviously the kitchen quarters. They were deserted.

Vivian found that out a moment later, when he stalked in to look for his wife. Diana and Alice had finished the washing up, changed their clothes and caught the hourly bus to Fleet, and the local cinema. Vivian had a good three hours alone in the house, to fan his temper. By dinner-time when they returned (and no provision had been made for dinner) he was raging.

'Get out,' he commanded the startled Alice, catching sight of her first. 'Go to bed. I want to talk to your mother.'

'Mummy——' Alice was torn between desire to protect her mother, and fear of Vivian. Discretion won, and she slunk away.

Diana, however, had had time to think. She hadn't been asked to engage the staff, and refused to be responsible for their absconding. On the other hand, she'd saved Vivian's face, at the expense of her manicure. She wasn't going to be browbeaten again. She was sure Prinny wouldn't have put up with it for a moment.

'Well?' She was sure of herself in her pastel gaberdine suit, that looked so simple and had cost so much. Her black hair hung on her shoulders, though Vivian was always chivvying her to 'do something with it'. She was quite as angry as he was, but more controlled. 'I think I did rather well for you, don't you agree?' She leaned gracefully on the banisters, not coming down to her husband. Not running away from him, either.

'I suppose you think it was a joke of some kind. I was absolutely disgusted.'

'Why? Wasn't the soup nice? Are you tired of chicken?'

'I am not discussing the menu, Diana, but your behaviour.'

Diana tapped her nails on the banister. 'Why discuss my behaviour? We don't discuss yours. Perhaps we should, of course.'

'Perhaps "explain" would be a better word. I think I have some right to an explanation.'

'I did what I did because it was necessary. Would you rather have brought your guests to an empty house? A wife in tears? Your servants walked out in a body this morning.'

'The servants are your department, Diana. You should have dealt with them.'

'I didn't know anything was wrong——'

'Then you should have known.'

'I didn't engage them. I wasn't consulted. Like everything else in this house, they were handed to me on a plate, and I was supposed to like them. The cook was a truculent woman, and the butler drank.'

'All servants have their faults. I bawl out Abel every so often, and he's served me faithfully for twenty years. At least, Stokes knew his wines. You served burgundy with chicken! I saw Clanratchet push his glass away——'

'Well—I forget how that happened. I had all the cooking to think about. But I know about wines, too. A bit, anyway. My father bought some every Christmas. You

drink white with fish and white meat—and red with the rest!’

‘Red and white wine—ye gods! As if there were just two flavours—like raspberry and vanilla. Don’t display your ignorance, please.’

Diana felt her anger master her. When she was angry enough, she didn’t care what she said to Vivian. It was only afterwards she remembered that she wanted to make him love her. ‘That’s all the thanks I get, for saving your face. I wish I’d let you bring your beastly guests to an empty house. I wish I’d made you look ridiculous—’

‘Diana, don’t shout at me.’ Vivian of course was the only person allowed to shout in temper.

‘You pick up four men and bring them home—they aren’t even friends, you said so—just “someone who doth feed upon my cost”—if I may show my ignorance further by quoting. You don’t ask me if it’s convenient, or what the staff plans are. This is supposed to be a home—not a hotel.’

‘Well, what do you think I pay money for?’ shouted Vivian. He grasped the newel-post as if he would chase after her, but his leg stopped him. ‘To be served—at my convenience. To be comfortable—’

‘If you use that word again, I’ll scream,’ Diana warned him, and she looked ready to scream. She turned, and marched upstairs after her daughter, not looking back. She didn’t go in to Alice, though. She threw herself into a chair in her own room, and lit an angry cigarette. Who does he think we are—Darby and Joan—talking about being comfortable? Does he think his money buys everything?

She was up against it, there. He’d proposed a bargain, and she’d accepted it. Sold herself. And it was she who wanted to alter the terms, not Vivian. For the first time, she thought seriously about leaving her husband.

Leaving her husband and doing—what? Back to a shop and digs, and a council school for Alice, after all the promises made to the child, and a glimpse of another

world? Would Prinny help her, or would she laugh and say, I told you so? Vivian thought so much of Prinny that Diana was sure that, but for his treatment of their son, she'd go back to him herself. Prinny could handle Vivian. Diana asked herself what she really wanted, and she knew at once. A husband she could love and respect, and who loved her. Who could provide the small-scale security she'd dreamed of, before she met Vivian.

And what had she expected? That she could change Vivian into an eager, loving husband. And she couldn't. She crushed out her cigarette and did her face and put a defiant lot of make-up on, and went downstairs in the quiet house. There was no one in the library, and she tried Vivian's own remedy for all trials. Three fingers of scotch, and not too much soda.

Vivian found her there, gasping after the unaccustomed drink. 'That's right. I'm glad you pulled yourself together. I was afraid I was in for a lonely evening.' He looked tired and distinguished, moving as if his leg pained him, and she was sorry at once. Vivian was merely humourless. She might have done a lot worse. Someone who hit her. Who hit Alice——

'I'm sorry, Vivian. I did it to help. I wouldn't really let you down in front of your friends, whatever happened. We'll get some more people to-morrow, and begin again. I'm not used to a household this size, you know.'

Vivian was somewhat mollified. It was possible, within limits, to appeal to his superior wisdom and experience. He sat in an armchair, his elbow on the arm, his head supported between thumb and index. 'You are not to blame, I suppose.'

'No, really I'm not.'

'Very well, then.'

She was too relieved to see she was being forgiven, though she hadn't been in the wrong. 'Look, Vivian. . . . Abel doesn't come back till nine, shall I get dinner for us? Eggs, or something cold? Alice will be going to bed . . .'

Vivian said he didn't want anything, and then agreed to an omelet and some fruit. Diana followed up her advantage. 'Your friend Clanratchet was talking about Lord Barchester. Couldn't we ask him to stay? You know you hate Mondays because your friends have to go back to Town.' She visualised the old man staying the inside of a week.

Lord Barchester came willingly, and stayed a month, requiring a special diet and a nightly chess partner. The only man in Sawley Mill who could give him a game was old Colonel Corrie, and Vivian hated Mrs. Corrie, and the couple had to be asked to dinner frequently, because of the visitor. Barchester was an elderly Welshman, a relative of Vivian's mother. Diana found him argumentative, a paralysing bore, and he presented her with a signed copy of his monologue entitled 'Whither Wales', and didn't tip the new servants a farthing. But he was a buffer—a buffer between Vivian and herself, and valuable as such.

The house was only full at week-ends, and Vivian began to hate the days from Monday to Friday. He had no interest in farming or shooting, and complained that the country bored him. He took to having a night or two at his club in midweek, and returning on Fridays with a carload of friends. Diana was quite glad of these respites. She wondered if Vivian ever took a girl to a night-club, and found she didn't really care. If one thing could have given her some happiness, it would have been a job.

She had one lesson at golf—and gave it up. She told Mrs. Corrie that she loathed bridge, thereby alienating the one person who could have made Sawley Mill bearable for her, independent of Vivian. One or two women called, and were eagerly invited to tea. They came, envied Diana her prosperity, priced the furniture to themselves, asked who her dressmaker was and added that they couldn't possibly afford him, and went home to tell their husbands how spoilt and unresponsive Diana Carter was. 'And the

plainest possible little girl—quite big, too. Her first husband was killed in the war . . . she says.'

Diana's own search for friends ended in humiliation and defeat. Strolling round the summer fields that bordered the grounds (they, too, belonged to the house, but she didn't know it) she saw a large cream caravan, an old chair and a clothes line with some very junior washing drying in the sun. A girl in yellow slacks was making her way to the van, carrying a slopping pail. She didn't see Diana watching her. 'Hallo,' said Diana.

The girl started guiltily. 'Oh . . . you gave me a fright.' There was a loud wail from the van. 'Mummeee.' She nodded her head towards the wail. 'Excuse me—my son. I had to leave him.'

Diana followed her to the van, which fascinated her, and would have fascinated Alice even more. 'I'm your neighbour, by the way. Have you been here long?'

The girl turned, surprised. She'd picked up her son, angry tears still on his face, and moved the pail with her free hand. 'I'd no idea we had neighbours. Do you hire your van—we do. Do sit down on the steps and have a cigarette. . . . Did you get permission to camp from the Hound of the Baskervilles?' She laughed at Diana's blank face. 'It's private land, really, but the house was empty when we came. Jerry—that's my husband—works for an airline at Blackbushe. He's Ground Control'—she made it sound like Lord High Chamberlain—'he goes in by motor bike.' She was talking and clearing the steps for Diana to sit down. The boy wriggled out of her clutch, took a step towards Diana, and fell headlong. Diana managed to catch him.

'He's sturdy. How old is he?'

'Thirteen months. He can't really walk yet. Aren't they hellish at that age?' The girl smiled engagingly at her visitor. Diana looked at her tangle of fair hair, large mouth and sun-warmed skin. How much more this girl got out of her caravan than she did out of Sawley Lodge!

She felt sure she and Jerry must be a delightful couple. She'd ask them to the house. 'Have you children?'

'One. She's just started boarding school.'

'Really? You look so young.'

'I'm twenty-nine.'

'I'm twenty-two. Jerry's twenty-eight.'

'Do tell me what you meant just then by the Hound of the Baskervilles?'

'Oh, that's our name for our landlord. At least Jerry says he's our landlord. Whether he'll accept our rent or turn us off remains to be seen. I've dodged him so far. . . . He's a grim, thin, black-looking man. That's just Jerry's absurd name for him. His name's Carter. By the way, I'm Helen Dix, and this is Peter.'

'How do you do. I'm Diana Carter.'

There was a tiny silence. Helen stared at her, dismayed. 'Oh . . . I didn't realise . . . I thought you were camping, too.' She looked ready to cry. 'We'll move on, naturally, if Mr. Carter objects. But it's difficult to get a site—'

Diana burst out laughing. 'Please don't worry. I'll speak to my husband myself. I shouldn't think he minds a bit. We seem to have got acres of land—and we don't use it for anything.' She knocked out her cigarette. 'You must come and have tea with me. I'm alone all day.'

'Are you? I mean—you seem so nice—and Mr. Carter seems—' She stopped, embarrassed. 'I'm talking nonsense. I'd love to come to tea, if I can get cleaned up sufficiently. Can I bring Peter? He wrecks everything.'

Diana assured her that it didn't matter, and she'd really love to see her. It was a long time since she'd talked to a young woman like herself. She'd taken to Helen at sight, as she'd taken to Prinny. Why shouldn't Vivian like Jerry? Or at least, why should Vivian dislike Jerry? Diana promised to send fruit and magazines, and told Helen not to bother about trespassing. 'I'll tell Vivian. I'm sure it will be all right.'

'Will you really? It'll be a weight off my mind if

we can stay. I'm sorry if I sounded rude about your husband.'

Diana laughed, and said Good-bye. She wandered back through the garden, making happy plans, some of which included the Dix family. What were the good of possessions if you couldn't share them? Like Alice, she adored giving, and it seemed so little. She'd laughed more that morning than during the whole of her marriage. She sat down and wrote off a description of the caravan to Alice, and mentioned it to Prinny on the phone.

'My dear, they've nicknamed Vivian the Hound of the Baskervilles! Doesn't it suit him?'

'I suppose you know what you're doing, but I should go easy. And don't count on Vivian getting pally with this man. Vivian hates men young enough to be his son. How's Alice? I had a card from her this morning.'

'Did you? The little so-and-so. She didn't write to me. Oh, Vivian may not care for this couple, of course, but they're decent people. Educated, I mean. And cheerful——'

She had one or two qualms after ringing off. Perhaps she had been premature, but Vivian couldn't possibly object to her being friendly with the girl. Vivian had urged her to make friends. 'Do what you like,' he'd said, 'as long as you tell me what you're doing.' She'd tell him to-night about the caravan family. She sat down to her solitary lunch, remembering Alice, and a little jealous that she'd written to Prinny, and not to her. I suppose it's that boy Hal, she comforted herself. She's got a crush on him.

Vivian came home for dinner, bringing only Barchester. 'Hallo, Diana. Had a good week? That's right. . . . Look, the Dalbys are coming to-morrow (that's one double room) and an Italian who drives for Concordi, and Ackerman's cousin—and that's all! A quiet week-end. Oh, my God, ring up old Corrie and get him over, can you? I'd forgotten about Barchester's chess.' He squared his shoulders in one of the many mirrors and walked off.

Later he said, 'I hear there are some damn gipsies camped on our land. I'll send Abel down. We can't have that sort of thing. They haven't worried you, have they?'

'No. . . . I haven't seen any gipsies.' She felt uncomfortable inside. He did mean gipsies—and not the Dix family? 'Er, there are some people with a caravan near the Mill. They're friends of mine. They're not gipsies. As a matter of fact——'

'Friends of yours?' Vivian looked searchingly at her. 'I didn't know you had any friends round here. Since when are they your friends?'

'Since this morning. I called on them——'

'You—called on people in a—caravan?' He emphasised the words ominously. 'Was there any reason?'

'None at all. I just liked them.' Somehow she knew she was fighting a losing battle, yet she couldn't stop. She was even angering her husband, for the sake of a couple she didn't really know—and never would. Only she'd laughed with Helen Dix. She'd been herself, and not the creature Vivian was making her. 'Vivian, let them alone, I beg you. We won't have them in the house if you wouldn't like it——'

That made it worse. So she'd actually asked them to the house—to his house—without consulting him, without considering his guests and his convenience? 'Do you think Barchester wants to meet gipsies? For heaven's sake, ring up Corrie, and finish this silly argument.'

'I'm not arguing. But I gave them my word——'

'Will you do as I say?'

'Look here, look here . . .' Barchester himself had waddled out of the library, surprised at their voices. 'I don't want to meet any gipsies. I don't like gipsies. I don't want to play chess—if it's too much trouble. Never like to make trouble. I'll just have a nightcap, and go to bed——' He looked forlornly at Diana over his glasses. 'Nobody wants to be old, you know, and feel they're a nuisance. It's a dreadful thing to be old.'

Diana apologised, and comforted him, and rang up

Colonel Corrie, and sat beside the board, applauding every move, and filling their glasses. She spoke to Vivian several times, but he preferred to listen to the radio. She got to bed at last, not knowing how the matter stood.

The other guests arrived next day, and she had Mrs. Dalby to entertain, and Colonel and Mrs. Corrie to lunch, and her time was full. She managed to whisper to her husband, 'Vivian, is it all right about those people in the caravan now?' and he nodded Yes.

She found out later what he meant, when Monday morning emptied the house of visitors. She ran down the field with the good news, and found—nothing. There was no caravan, no washing, no smiling Helen. Only the flattened grass where the van had stood, and oil from the motor-bike. Vivian had turned them out without notice.

The next time Vivian went to Town, he came back glowing with news. Somebody had suggested a meet of veteran racing cars, and he was taking part with the model he'd driven to victory in 1922. It was to be brought to London in a furniture van from the foundry, where it was stored. Vivian himself had remembered old Moriot, once the fastest thing on four wheels, and now living in obscurity in Pimlico, and he was to preside at the gathering. The only difficulty was to find enough ancient racing cars to take part, and veterans free to drive them.

At length seven cars were found, brave with paint and leather strapping, outside brakes and hooters like old-style gramophones. There was no question of a race on public roads, had the cars been capable of it. The idea, Vivian explained to an excited Diana, was to drive gently from East Grinstead, their starting point, to the coast. They would then celebrate old times with a dinner at Vivian's club.

'Do you mean I come with you?' She had visions of herself in goggles and motoring veils, beside him. She was quickly disillusioned. But she wrote gaily to Alice about the race. Moriot, whom she met, was the most gallant

and charming old man. He was proud, and happy, and a little sad.

'No man can go on for ever. Ah, madame, these youngsters to-day will be Moriots to-morrow!' She'd heard it before, at her wedding reception. 'I only hope it will be safe,' the old man added.

'Safe? Do you mean these old cars aren't safe?'

'Oh, the cars are fairly safe, mechanically—if it pleases the good God they start at all. It is the old men who are not safe.'

Diana—and the Press and a group of enthusiasts and the local schoolchildren—saw the six cars start. One had dropped out already. She was photographed wishing Vivian luck, and appeared in all the evening papers. Then they were off, coughing and backfiring madly, and she could only go home and wait.

Apart from wanting Vivian to win, she knew life would be unlivable with him if he didn't. She was fairly confident, however. Vivian had more enthusiasm than any of the younger men and—Moriot had told her—the best car.

It was on the evening news bulletin. Vivian had made the best time to the coast, and was considered to have won. She imagined him the centre of attraction and congratulation. He'd love that. Where would he be now? Back in Town yet? She wondered whether to telephone her own congratulations, or wait. There was quite a lot about Vivian on the radio. 'Captain Carter, D.S.O., the veteran speed king . . . his lucky car, a 40 h.p. Sprengel-Ardès . . . retirement . . . many interests . . . foundry at Beresford.' Diana was still listening when Vivian walked into the room.

'Vivian! Oh, my darling! Congratulations. I am so glad. . . . But I thought you were celebrating in Town?'

Vivian looked so ghastly she was frightened. 'I am so glad. . . .' Her voice trailed off. Never, never allude to Vivian looking tired. 'I expect you came back to change. Can I fix you a drink?'

'Yes. I'll take it neat. Poor old chap.' He was

obviously shaken. He fell, rather than sat, into the nearest chair. The radio was still talking. Someone's obituary.

'Moriot,' Vivian told her briefly. 'Went back to London and dropped dead. Excitement, I suppose. The dinner's abandoned, of course.' He knocked back the whisky, and sat silent. Presently the glass dropped from his fingers and splintered on the floor. Diana rushed to his side.

'You've had a shock.' Even in her panic, she remembered to lie. The man was ashen, trembling, incapable of speech. He ought to have a doctor. But the appearance of a doctor, however necessary, would throw him into a fury. Which was the worse evil—distress of body, or distress of mind? While Diana hesitated, Vivian slid out of his chair on to the floor in a dead faint. Just at that moment the solid Buller, successor to Stokes, appeared in the doorway.

'The master didn't say, ma'am, if he'd be dining here, or going straight to London——' He stopped, seeing Vivian on the floor. Ignoring Diana, he hurried to his side, switching off the radio, which was now offering gramophone records. 'And this is from Eileen in Hartlepool, to her brother Eddie in Hamburg, Germany——' Blessed, blessed silence. Buller was bending over Vivian.

'He's right out. What they call a syncope, I think. I'll get Dr. Greenbanks at once, if that's all right with you.' He was gone, without waiting for Diana to say whether it was all right, or not. She roused herself to waylay the doctor on his arrival.

'I don't think you know my husband——' So far, he'd seen only Alice for a minor upset. 'I'm afraid he's fainted. Look, the thing is, he'll get upset if you refer to it.'

'Refer to it?' The doctor stared at her as if he thought her crazy. 'Suppose you let me handle Captain Carter, will you?'

Diana was only too willing. She hurried upstairs to her room. Vivian had fainted from exhaustion, the unusual exercise, excitement. . . . It wasn't serious. And then she remembered Moriote, and what excitement had done to him.

Poor, gay, charming old man, so happy to be chosen. . . . Joking only that morning about going downhill. . . . She patted her face with an outsize puff, like a nervous actress, fidgeting with all the battery of beauty laid out on her dressing-table. She was listening for the doctor, who was in the drawing-room with Vivian. It's a good thing Alice is at school, she thought. None of his friends need know. . . . The servants will talk, I suppose. . . . Good job they cancelled this dinner. . . . Poor Monsieur Moriot. Oh, there's the door.

The doctor was a brisk and busy G.P. He didn't know Vivian, and saw no reason for make-believe games with a middle-aged man. 'Really, at his age, a man should have more sense. No, it isn't serious—yet. Keep him quiet. And not too much whisky. If necessary, push that idiotic car over a cliff-side—'

He refused the sherry she offered him almost rudely, and drove away.

Diana went back to her husband. He was conscious, but dazed. 'Good God, Diana—I never fainted?' He was silent for some time, marvelling at it. 'Never happened before—never. I say, none of the servants saw, did they? I had an idea there was someone here—a man?'

'I was here. And the radio was on.'

'Oh . . . I'm not ill really. It was just a spell.'

'You're not ill, really. It was just a spell.' Repeating the lie, like a prisoner being indoctrinated.

His face, the drawn face of an old man, frightened her. She was used to Vivian's saturnine face, to his discreet make-up, but especially to his manner, his authority. The change now was pitiful, and yet she felt drawn to him. Perhaps this man, the real man-beneath-the-skin, needed her. For the first time in her life she was stronger than he was, wiser, more realistic. He was slumped pathetically in the chair from which he'd slipped and into which he'd been propped again, and she sat down on a cushion on the floor beside him—avoiding the broken glass—and took his hand.

'You were worried over poor Moriot—and the responsibility of everything—and the race.'

'Yes, yes. I was worried.'

'It's so sad about the poor old man. Just when he was so happy. It was the excitement——'

'Of course. The excitement.'

'Which a man of his age should never have undertaken.' Already their rôles were reversed, and he was repeating the lesson. 'Just think, if he hadn't been dug out of his retirement, he'd be alive to-night!'

'A man of his age ought to recognise his limitations!' snapped Vivian. Moriot, in his opinion, had had enough sympathy. He didn't think of taking his own remark to heart. He clung to Diana's hand, though. A deep frown raised his forehead under the thin, dyed hair.

'I don't think you ought to organise any more meets——' Diana was picking her words carefully. 'It's too great a strain—on other people, of course. Not everyone has your wonderful stamina, Vivian. So it isn't fair on them. . . . And then the roads get congested. And the extra police. And the crowds, even this morning——' She got Vivian to agree to no more racing cars—out of consideration for other people. They sat in silence, both heavy with their own thoughts. Diana stroked the hand she held (it was still trembling) and laid her cheek on her husband's sleeve. She was wondering how to persuade him to eat a light meal (part of his trouble was that he hadn't eaten since breakfast) when the miracle happened.

'Don't ever leave me, Diana. I need you . . . always. Don't go away from me.'

'Oh, Vivian!' Sluice gates of longing were opened inside her, and she trembled almost as much as he did. He was her husband, her man, a man who'd chosen her publicly, whom she longed to love. 'I won't leave you, Vivian, my dear. I'll do anything you want. Go where you say. I don't want any life apart from you.'

He lay in his chair, as if he hadn't heard her, and Diana was so occupied with the confession of her own feelings

she hardly bothered if he did. It was enough—for a beginning—that Vivian accepted her affection and wanted her beside him. She felt light-headed, as if she—not he—had taken an active part in the day's nerve-testing events. From time to time he muttered, and when she asked him what he was saying, fell silent. But it was enough for Diana. For the moment, it was enough.

Those twilit minutes, on the floor beside Vivian, were the happiest of her marriage. There were no thoughts in her mind—only feelings. At last her husband had seen beyond her beauty into her woman's heart, ready to love, to serve. At last he'd admitted she was not merely an ornament, but a figure of importance in his life. It had taken a severe physical jolt to break down his extraordinary resistance to her—a resistance that was no compliment—but since it had broken, no matter now.

'My darling, I've wanted to love you so much, but you wouldn't let me. And I want you to love me—I'm not the sort of doormat that wants to love unrequited. We've got so much, the two of us. So many good years together still to come. Let's not waste them in a silly chase for first youth. Let's enjoy whatever life brings. Let's face things together, as adults, and not pretend any more!' Diana whispered on, unanswered. The shadows lengthened, from baby blue to navy. The high, elegant room filled unwillingly with dusk. Books they had never read (she supposed Hendry must have chosen them) lined the shelves behind them. Flower prints that only Alice had examined with interest. Vivian's home was a machine for entertaining people: he wasn't interested in it as a home. A clock ticked politely, as if it knew it was only a background noise, never to dominate. Outside the long windows, a bat flung itself about in the summer sky, and disappeared. Vivian was calmer, and Diana's hand agonised with cramp. The floor was hard through her cushion. The magic faded.

Without disturbing Vivian, she switched on a reading lamp, and hundreds of insects began to dash themselves against the closed windows and hurry inside through the

open ones. She detached her hand stealthily, and began to pat her disordered hair. Only just in time.

Polite as the clock, his face as smooth and polished, Buller appeared once more.

'I don't wish to disturb you, ma'am, but if there's anything particular you'd like to order. . . . I took the liberty of telling Cook no full dinner, but perhaps a little cold chicken and wine. . . .' He was looking at Vivian, his head hidden in the cushions of the chair. 'Dr. Greenbanks has sent a sedative——'

But Vivian had no need of a sedative. He was sleeping peacefully. He woke later in a foul temper, asked where the hell Buller was, and why Diana was hanging over him, drank a stiff whisky despite her protests, told Buller to bring him a sandwich upstairs, and stalked off to bed.

Buller relaxed sufficiently to murmur to Diana, 'He's a brave man, the captain is.'

That was one of Vivian's few outstanding points. He was brave, even if idiotically so. And generous. And courteous too. But somehow Vivian, like Charlie the goldfish, defied love.

Diana lay awake in the summer night, trying to puzzle things out. Vivian, sufficiently exhausted, admitted he needed her. But Vivian, restored, indignantly denied his need. So what was the value of such an admission? Diana's illusory happiness cost hours of bitter tears. She lay awake all the tepid night, now smoking, now counting sheep, now sitting bolt upright with her arms round her knees. She couldn't conceive a man insensitive to love—and she'd married one. There was no solution to her problem without involving Alice. And there was always the thousandth chance that Vivian might remember he needed her. . . .

A fortnight later, after Paul Moriot had been buried, she insisted on accompanying Vivian to the memorial service in London. Like the sessions at his club, she found herself the only woman there.

CHAPTER VI

VIVIAN never referred again to needing her, and love remained a mirage in the desert of their marriage. For desert it was, despite appearances. They had nothing in common at all. At first, Vivian had invited Diana to accompany him to London. Now he didn't bother. He drove off on Monday with the week-end visitors, and returned on Friday, with a new lot. Diana was left in charge of the Sawley Lodge Hotel. Nevertheless, the week-days were respites from the chaos of week-ends, and Diana and the staff could relax.

During one of these respites, the inevitable happened—the second catastrophe. The long summer had ended, harvest stripped the fields, and blustering west winds stripped the trees. Diana stood in the drive talking to the gardener about sweeping the leaves up. The wind carried their words away to join the mad race of leaves that Alice loved. It tore at the load on the wheel-barrow and the emptying branches and Vivian's bespoke shirts on Mrs. Coombs' clothes-line (Mrs. Coombs having stayed on, as she put it, 'to see the fun'). Diana, in an amethyst twin set and slip grey skirt, was asking Gabriel whether the little winged things were hornbeams, and if hornbeams were maples, and would they seed? And Gabriel was trying to tell her it was a waste of time sweeping till the main of the leaves were down. The wind tumbled Diana's long black hair and whistled a tile or two off the turret roof, which Vivian hadn't used, and Alice had appropriated.

There was a car in the drive, and Diana turned in surprise. None of Vivian's friends called when he was in Town—except by mistake. During the week, the drive was empty. Vivian went to London, and his friends

hurried to join him, like moths to a candle. Nor was this the sort of car that most of Vivian's friends drove. It was a small black saloon, not quite new, and out of it got Hendry Carter.

'My dear Hendry—how nice of you to call.' Diana gave him her hand, wondering if anything urgent brought him after his father. She'd never understood Vivian's attitude to his son, nor Hendry's subjugation to Vivian. 'I'm afraid your father's in Town. He went up yesterday. Wait. . . . I can give you his number.'

'I'd rather you gave me lunch,' suggested Hendry. 'I shouldn't think the old man would grudge me that.'

'Well, come and have a drink, first.' She took him into the library. He peeled off his overcoat and smoothed his unruly black hair. 'Vivian doesn't know you're here?'

'No. If he did—I shouldn't be.' He gulped his sherry and stared at her challengingly, as if he expected her to say he was very brave.

'I'm sorry to hear that.' Diana clasped her long fingers in her lap. She was going to be very correct, very neutral. 'I nevertheless wish he were here. I think we should receive you together.' Really, she was thinking, Vivian was very stupid in his handling of this young man. Obviously, he was weak and spoilt, but whose fault was that? Hendry spent his time at the Carter Foundry, presumably making money for his father to spend. He had a taste for French poetry, and a flair for furnishing—really, it was very harmless. She poured him another sherry. 'We've kept this house as you arranged it. I don't think we've moved a thing.'

'I enjoyed it. It was the least I could do for you.'

Buller inquired whether the gentleman would be staying to lunch, and Diana told him Yes.

It was a pleasant, intimate meal, with just the two of them. With Vivian, she was always distressed if they found themselves alone together, because it was a mark of her failure to arrange company for him—he was such a helpless hedonist. Hendry said several times how lucky he

was to find her alone. His remarks were not profound, but he was more amusing than his father, and his admiration of herself very obvious.

'You haven't been here for some time. . . . I thought at first you were going to come every week.'

'Vivian always holds the floor. I get so tired of clapping. Don't you?'

She said lightly, 'Oh, you must know how much your father likes an audience. He's like an actor in that.'

'Is he?'

'Isn't he?'

'Perhaps. And you're the most beautiful leading lady he's ever had—but I suppose you've heard that?' It was funny how empty the compliment was, coming from Hendry. He crumbled bread. '*La femme de trent ans*,' he said dreamily.

'Not till next month,' snapped Diana, signalling Buller to clear the course. It was funny, too, when father and son were so alike, she had absolutely no ambition to enchant Hendry. Still, the novelty of a companion was pleasant, and knowing the family, he might even be useful.

'Tell me . . . ' Of course, Hendry would have known Prinny as Mrs. Carter, and even her predecessor. 'Did you live with your father when he was married before?' Her heart beat urgently for his answer—as if knowing about Prinny as a wife was going to help her with Vivian now.

'M'm. Off and on.' Hendry selected a stick of celery and munched it down. Diana writhed in impatience.

'I always thought it was the love of his life.' Hendry motioned No. 'And it wasn't, after all?'

'The love of Vivian's life is Vivian—haven't you noticed? A form of narcissism. Fell in love with his reflection in the fishpond at the age of eight, or something. The young Vivian, mind—age would spoil it.' Another stick of celery went down, and a glass of claret followed it. 'That's the sum total of his regard for me—a projection of his self.'

'How about your regard for him?'

'Father has the mental powers of an earwig——'

'Hendry!'

'—combined with the presence of an ambassador. That's why I was astounded—'

'At what?'

'At anyone as young and lovely and dynamic as yourself bothering with him. Nice for him, of course. Especially after the somewhat carminative Prinny.'

She let the compliment ride. 'Once and for all, what happened with Prinny?'

'Nothing, really. Prinny arrived all starry-eyed and culture-starved from her native bush, with aspirations to play the piano—which she does with more strength than soul. Father was like a character out of a book, to her. . . . But take one flamboyant personality, add another—and the result is chaos. They both filled the limelight. People started taking sides. . . . The odds were shortest on Prinny. I rather fancied her myself. Then she started a thing about Father being a bad influence on her darling che-hild, the old man consoled himself in kinder arms than hers, she took it seriously, and hey presto! divorce. Father, my dear Diana, was just madly jealous of Prinny. And still is.'

'But they still see a good deal of each other.'

'They have too many mutual friends not to. After all, why should they boycott each other, now? Vivian's safely married to you.'

It was much what she'd expected to hear, after all. To deflect his attention from her obsession with Prinny, she asked if he remembered her predecessor.

'Oh, Janet, you mean? A shrew. The one time I was really sorry for the old man. She took her play acting seriously and called it art. Died in America. Overdose. One of the pheno-barbitones. To complete the saga, there was my own mother, too. She died when I was born. No scandal at all. But you can't do much in ten months, can you?'

Diana didn't care for Hendry's way of talking about his father's wives. and then she thought what Hendry's life

under the various Mrs. Carters must have been. 'Tell me about yourself, now. What do you do?'

He said with sudden modesty, 'Oh, I occupy a minor executive position at the foundry. I'm a bachelor, with very few friends. . . . I paint a little, write a little, dream a little. . . . One day, unless I blot my copybook seriously, I'll be head boy at the foundry. I can wait.'

'Do you call that a satisfactory life?'

'No. But up to last Easter, I could bear it.'

'What happened last Easter?'

'You married my father!'

'Did that affect you, particularly?'

'Did a vision affect Joan of Arc?' He was leaning across the polished table, a pulse beating in his forehead, his eyes unsmiling. He really wanted her to answer. 'Well, did it?'

She felt her own pulse quicken, although she didn't really care for the young man. If only it had been Vivian speaking! She recognised the quicksands ahead. No, he wasn't worth the risk.

She said primly, 'I think you should remember that I'm your father's wife. Your stepmother, in fact.'

He ignored that. 'Have you ever seen the foundry, Diana? Have you seen the Midlands? Flat and hideous and spiritually isolated. Women with money in the bank and scarves round their heads like peasants. Men with a couple of cars, and no grammar, thinking they're little toy kings—'

'I think that's a ridiculous picture of the Midlands. You can't be the only poet soul there. Look at Shakespeare! He came from the middle of England—'

'Not the middle of industrial England. Not the blind brick walls and smoke stacks and furnaces. Shakespeare's England was a green and pleasant land, my dear.'

'Well, if you hate it so much, why stay there?'

'Do you suggest I become another irresponsible oaf like Vivian? Spending money I don't earn, and marrying women I don't deserve and can't hold?'

She knew she hated him, then. 'That's a beastly thing to say—and it's not true! You're father isn't jealous of you. It's you who are jealous of him! I'm only sorry my husband isn't here to deal with you. But Buller can find your coat.'

He changed his mood at once. 'That's not necessary, Diana, I'll go. But I don't want to go with you angry with me. If you knew me better, you'd understand my attitude to my father. What Vivian can't win—he buys!'

Hendry left without waiting for coffee, and Diana determined to tell Vivian of his son's visit, and see that it didn't occur again when she was alone. She thought of several cutting remarks which she could have made to Hendry, had he waited. She even recognised truth in some of his statements.

Vivian rang up that afternoon that he was coming tomorrow, with a party. He mentioned the name of Muspratt, and threw Diana into a panic, because of her imaginary meeting with Jack Muspratt at Cannes. She went over the bedrooms with Lisa, the smart new Austrian girl, checked stores with Buller, and menus with Cook. Cook wanted a hair sieve, and the Fleet shops had none.

'You might get one in Reading, ma'am. Or Basingstoke.'

'Yes, of course. I'll ring up.'

'I'll want it to-night, if I'm to make that consomme Mr. Carter likes so.'

Buller appeared from the pantry behind Diana. 'You wouldn't care to drive over, ma'am? There's the Lagonda, in the garage—'

'I'm afraid I can't drive,' Diana admitted, feeling very helpless. Vivian, of course, must have his consomme—if she had to walk to Portsmouth for a sieve. 'Abel drives. . . . Or what about you, Buller?'

But Abel was in town with Vivian, and the butler indicated that he had better things to do than drive round the country shops, looking for hair sieves. 'I understand that Gabriel drives. He learnt in the Army, he tells me.'

Diana, relieved, went out to find Gabriel. Yes, he had a valid licence. He was perfectly willing to abandon the losing battle with the leaves and do Cook's errand. Diana explained exactly what was wanted, gave him a pound, and watched him back the long black car out of the garage. Only after he'd gone did she have any misgivings about entrusting Vivian's car to the gardener. She'd suggested learning to drive herself, and Vivian had said, 'If you like. But not on my car. I'd rather buy you one to wreck.'

Diana went upstairs, hoping for the best. She changed her clothes, came down, had tea, tried to listen to the radio, and waited in a crescendo of alarm for the car's return. Six o'clock, seven. . . . What could the man be doing? The shops were shut. Had he broken down, run out of petrol?

At half past seven, Buller announced dinner. Five minutes later, the phone rang. It was the police station. There'd been an accident. . . .

Nobody hurt, a careful Hampshire voice assured Diana, but there were one or two points. Would she confirm that her gardener had permission to use his employer's car?

'Yes, yes. I told him to. He was on an errand.'

'Uhuh. Then Captain Carter has the usual insurance covering him? We shall want the number of the certificate.'

'All right.' Diana crossed her fingers. But of course her husband was insured——

'Because the driver of the other car is making a claim. So is the young lady. Third party, you understand.'

'What . . . young lady?' Diana's heart sank. She pushed the door shut with her foot. Buller was listening.

'Passenger in your car, Mum. Thrown against the wind-screen and cut her face a bit. Making a big fuss—but the doctor says she'll be back at work in a week. Your car's lost one wing.'

Gabriel returned in a police car later that night. Far from being apologetic, he was truculent. He was employed

as a gardener, wasn't he? He'd driven the car to oblige, seeing nobody else could. Well, what of the girl? It was a girl he knew, and he'd given her a lift. Diana dismissed him to his cottage. Any hopes she might have had of keeping the accident from Vivian faded completely. The car was dragged home by a breakdown truck next day—the police had minimised the damage—and a furious Mrs. Wilks (apparently the young lady's mother) called to know what Diana was going to do about it.

Diana was just telling Buller that she couldn't possibly see the woman, when Prinny drove up.

'Prinny!' Here was sanity, rescue, hope. Diana seized Prinny and clung to her. 'Am I glad to see you! For God's sake tell me what to do!'

'Dear me.' Prinny sized up the situation, coolly. 'Here I come for a female tea chatter—about Alice, mainly—and you're on the verge of hysterics. Has Vivian left you?'

'Worse than that!' Diana told her the story of the hair sieve. 'Well, what do I do now?'

'Candidly, you're an ass, Diana. Like you were over the caravan people. You just don't use your head.' Prinny pulled off a suede glove, dove grey like her vigorous hair. She wasn't smiling. Buller came in and waited, and she gave him her coat and dismissed him with a nod. I ought to have dismissed him, Diana thought miserably. The truth is, I'm scared of him. He thinks I'm feeble—and I am. 'Well, aren't you going to give me tea?'

'Yes, of course.' She fidgeted with her bracelets, with the cigarettes, starting nervously at a scud of October rain at the window. Ten past four! She caught herself thinking with a sort of nostalgia about her life in the days before Vivian, in the days of freedom. I'd be getting up, now, if I was going to the club. . . . Alice would run in, demanding tea. I'd be listening to her with one ear, and to the Poles' radio with the other. . . . I did enjoy earning my living. I just didn't realise it at the time. I'm pretty useless here.

She lit her visitor's cigarette and walked over to the

window. The leaves were as thick as ever on the new lawns and the drive. 'It doesn't seem possible! Twenty-four hours ago it hadn't happened——'

'Does Vivian know?' Prinny asked behind her in the room.

'No. But he will—to-morrow.'

'Tell me, Diana . . . had you planned to have Alice here at her half-term?'

Diana sat down on the arm of a chair, alerted at something in Prinny's voice. 'Of course. I'm looking forward to it. Why do you ask?'

'Because I shouldn't,' Prinny told her bluntly. 'In the first place, there's going to be an almighty row about that car. In the second, you'll have to ask Vivian to fetch her, or spare his man, seeing it's across country. Thirdly, do you really think a week-end here, with you falling over backwards pleasing Vivian and his retinue, is ideal for a girl of eleven?'

'I don't doubt you know Vivian better than I do—as yet,' Diana began hotly. 'But from all accounts, your influence with him dates from your divorce——'

'Only one person could have suggested that. Hendry.' Prinny didn't sound annoyed, but strangely compassionate. 'Let's get back to Alice. Would you consider letting her come to me for the half-term? You're welcome to come over and see her, naturally.'

'I imagine this house is good enough to Alice! Vivian certainly thinks it is. Have you any special attractions for my daughter—apart from your cats?'

Prinny shook her head. 'I just like kids,' she said. 'I don't like to see them lonely. I wasn't talking about the trappings. Of course I have fewer bedrooms, fewer acres, one modest saloon car, and only old Connie to fuss her. On the other hand, it's a home where everyone welcomes her.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Prinny. This is her home.'

'Is it, Diana? Is it yours? I bet right now you wish you were somewhere else.'

Diana denied it, wondering how Prinny could have known what she was just thinking. She hated Prinny to guess (and of course she did guess) that she was just a glorified housekeeper. And be sorry for her. And solicitous about Alice. 'I wish Alice could have known her grandparents' home. It's quite comparable to this,' she remembered rosilily. 'At least . . . it wasn't poor.'

'Oh?' Prinny sounded really interested. 'Mine was—at first. I can remember scrubbing floors and milking cows. . . . And then Dad made money, suddenly. He went into wool. And our whole life changed. My sister and I were still young enough to be sent to Europe for a fancy education, music lessons and what have you. I wouldn't have got into Vivian's world if I hadn't had money. So I raise my glass to you'—she raised her teacup and smiled over the gilt brim—'for doing just that. Without money! Now, will you let me have Alice to stay?'

'No.'

'Is that final?'

'It is.'

'The motion is defeated, then. Point two is Hendry.'

'I didn't realise you'd come here to cross-examine me about the way I run my life.' Diana was furious. Only it was difficult to be furious with anyone so unaware of her fury as Prinny Lunt, smiling comfortable encouragement opposite her.

'I don't like the word cross-examining. Nor warn. All the same, it's a fair cow—'

'I beg your pardon?'

'An extraordinary predicament, if you prefer.'

'What is, for heaven's sake?'

'Alice feeling uncomfortable here, and Hendry comfortably sure of his welcome!'

'Who told you that?' What had Prinny come for—to insult her, or admonish her? And why should she imagine she'd take either. She was Vivian's wife—not Prinny.

'Why, both of them, bless their hearts! Alice is ill at ease with Vivian, who makes no effort with her. I ran

into Hendry, and he described his visit in detail. He seemed encouraged to come again.'

'My husband will know about his son's visit—and about his car, as soon as he arrives to-morrow.' Diana found a dry little voice somewhere behind her teeth. 'Really, Prinny, I don't want to rush you, but you've a dark drive back to Town——'

Prinny stood up gracefully. 'All right, I can take a hint. But don't forget, if things get sticky—especially if they get sticky for Alice—you know where I live. And you must meet my son, sometime. Allowing for a mother's prejudice, he's such an improvement on Hendry. Good-bye.'

In a few seconds she was gone, and Diana had her sitting-room to herself. It was cold, suddenly, as if the sun had gone out of the sky.

Vivian was avid about his car. ('Are you mad, letting that hooligan drive it? Ye gods, a car I tuned myself! Why don't you organise your household so that you have all your damn bits of kitchen stuff?') It went on for hours, and the servants heard, till Diana locked herself in her bedroom and lay and . . . yawned. She was upset, of course, and guilty. But Vivian made such a fuss, all apology died unspoken. Let him rage, then. He was a bore with his rages. She turned on her radio, and records succeeded talks and quartets and news bulletins, and she tried to concentrate on them. Her long nervous fingers punished cigarette after cigarette, and her eyes were dark with hate. She wouldn't answer the door, suspecting that it might be Vivian, and the maid crept away alarmed. At last (but only for the sake of the guests, whom she'd come to think of as the week-end rabble, collected in the highways and byways, and compelled to come in) she dressed and went downstairs. To them she talked brightly and loudly, ignored Vivian, who in turn behaved as if he were in his club, and ignored her.

He was perfectly justified about the car, of course. The insurance did not cover a chance driver, like Gabriel.

Vivian had to pay for the damage it had suffered, as well as that which Gabriel had caused. It meant consultations with the local police, repairs to the car, the gardener to be sacked, the girl to be indemnified. Vivian's black mood lasted through the week-end: and so did his wife's anger. It was Monday before they spoke to each other.

Diana found him alone in the library, looking old and lonely, and she was touched in spite of herself. After all, he was her husband, a special chosen person, whatever his shortcomings, or her own. Diana had been brought up to regard marriage as a serious contract. Not lightly to be broken. Nor sloughed off.

She crossed the wide parquet floor which separated them, her green hems sweeping on the wood, her face as grotesquely white as a Guinea mask. She put her hands on Vivian's shoulders. 'Dear, dear Vivian . . . it was my fault from beginning to end. But can't we forget it?'

She read the answer in his face before he spoke. Vivian was gluttoned with opportunity and experience. Weary with it. He no longer cared for the thrust and parry of argument, the competition of wits. He just wanted uncritical cotton-wool admiration packed round him, every hour of the day. He turned away in his chair, and her hands fell. 'Perhaps I should go away, and leave you here?'

'Wherever you leave me, I'll look a fool.'

'Then I'll stay—if that's what you want, Vivian.' Couldn't he see, her defences were down, she was spiritually naked before him? Offering herself to him? But it was too late. Perhaps, if she'd been the first wife, or even the second. . . . Vivian was uninterested in making the effort of meeting her half-way. Or quarter-way. Or taking a token step, and leaving her to make the way alone. 'I'll do anything to please you.' It was a forlorn hope, now.

He only moved impatiently. 'It will please me if you consider my comfort, Diana. I have my faults—but other women lived with them. I need your youth, your beauty. Only give me that.'

His obsession with her youth! And she was thirty, already. Only it was wisest not to mention that just now.

'I want a smiling face . . . the domestic machine running smoothly . . . my guests welcome . . . my wife at my side.'

It sounded so reasonable when he said it like that. Hendry's words came back to her. What Vivian doesn't win—he buys. Like something expensive from Bond Street. A jewel. A curio. A possession to make other men envious. But not a wife. Not what old Dr. Monroe had called 'his better half'.

Vivian roused himself suddenly—his reaction, if any, was always theatrical—and rang for a bottle of champagne. Once more he was the magnanimous husband, forgiving her (forgiving her for trying to get his beastly consommé at any price), she thought bitterly. She didn't care for champagne but she toasted him gaily. When he seemed in a better mood, she mentioned Alice's half-term. But possibly Abel could fetch her? It had never occurred to Vivian to engage a chauffeur, or keep a car for Diana's convenience. During the week, she was marooned at the house without transport. She was too proud to complain, though the village talked it over at length. Too pretty to take chances with! was their verdict. They resented her beauty as they resented Vivian's money. Too much concentrated in one person. It struck them as unfair.

'Alice?' Vivian's gaiety was evaporating faster than the champagne bubbles. 'My dear, not this week-end, please. I've got two of my directors from the foundry staying. They insist on talking business to me. And with the Lagonda out of action, we've only the one car. Can't she come in mid-week, when I'm away?'

Diana realised that he'd never understand, so she smiled again and said she'd arrange something. Arranging something (since she'd categorically refused Prinny's invitation) meant telephoning the disappointed Alice in the morning, with a lie of some kind, and making her stay at school.

'Of course.' Vivian sounded relieved. 'She'll be com-

pany for you when I'm away. Can't think what you do with yourself—tea parties and dogs and flowers. Why don't you come up at mid-week, and we'll have a party?'

Diana agreed brightly. If I can fit it in, she added to herself. The preparation and clearing up of Vivian's weekends was monumental. She did more than Lisa and Buller together, but Vivian needn't know.

Somehow, after the explosion about the car, Diana never mentioned Hendry's visit and Hendry, a complacent young man, called again. Diana was both annoyed and amused: she told him—and meant it—that he shouldn't do it. Yet he was her only opportunity for laughter. It was lonely, during the week, helping with the housework and walking down to the village and eating every meal alone. If it hadn't been for Vivian's heavy drinking, Diana would have joined him in Town. But though there were no orgies at Sawley Lodge, some of Vivian's friends in Town were less careful. However, as far as Hendry was concerned, she ordered him to tell his father about his calls at Sawley Mill (he swore he had—it was only later she realised he'd told Prinny, instead) and she saw him off the premises before dark.

Not that there was anything wrong in receiving her stepson to a meal—it was all open and above-board. But the kitchen talked, and the village talked, and sometimes Diana wished that Vivian would drive up unexpectedly, and find how innocent their relationship was.

Hendry was a creature of habit. He took to coming on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and it wasn't until Diana had the curiosity to look up Beresford on the map, that she saw how far it was. She told Hendry he was crazy, and Hendry protested that it was a slack time at the foundry, and his father didn't care.

After lunch, Diana insisted they took a brisk walk about the winter countryside. It served two purposes: it exercised the dogs (two spaniels, originally bought for Alice) and gave Hendry no chance of gazing into her eyes and holding her hand.

Once they came to a clearing, and scrambled breathlessly down to the lane, to find themselves face to face with Mrs. Corrie—Diana flushed and sparkling in the rust-red tweeds she loved, and Mrs. Corrie shapeless with woollens in many colours. Hendry, always slower, had pink cheeks and his tie hanging out. Diana thought briefly of the many guineas Mrs. Corrie's Girls had had, and the many chess games the colonel had played (and punished Vivian's brandy unmercifully) and knew she could expect no charity for herself.

'Why, good afternoon, Mrs. Corrie. Out walking?'

'I am. But at my age I take my walks alone, Mrs. Carter!' She nodded so pleasantly and walked past, that Diana couldn't believe what she'd said.

'Old bag. Who is she?' Hendry thrust out what chin he had. 'Is she going to tell my father?'

'Oh, really?' If you're scared of your father, why do you come here pestering me and getting me talked about?'

'Diana! Do I pester? Are you talked about?'

'Mrs. Corrie is the local news factory. She's never forgiven me for not learning bridge.' Diana was worried, but not unreasonably so. She had no reason to feel guilty . . . and yet she did feel guilty. I'm over-sensitive, she decided, flicking dead stalks in the hedge with the dogs' lead. I'm alone too much. . . . Roll on Christmas, and bring me Alice back. I suppose I ought to have a chaperone, and scotch the rumours!

They came to a stile, and Hendry vaulted over it; he helped her gallantly across. 'Do get the dogs—I'm always scared when they go after rabbits on the shooting range.' Hendry loped off obediently, and Diana sat down on a dry bank to wait.

Although she couldn't take Hendry seriously, she found him reasonably human. He would listen for hours about Alice, about her childhood in the doctor's house, even about poor old Tim. The only thing she couldn't talk over was her relationship with his father. He laughed at her over the Goldbergs and the Band Box, belittled Rodney

Harmer's efforts on the Thames, and told her his own woes at great length. They sympathised with each other. Diana teased and scolded, Hendry protested and grumbled and tried to kiss her hand. Before he got any further, it was always dusk, and Buller was holding his coat.

He came back now, with the dogs, panting. 'You do make me work for my lunches, Diana.' He dropped on the bank beside her, his thick hair ruffled, his face flushed. 'Supposing I got shot on the range? Ever thought of that?'

She answered lightly and without thought. 'Then I'll put on your tombstone, "He died for love!"'

He said soberly, 'It would be true enough.'

Diana began to fuss the dogs. 'I think Spanker's picked up a thorn in his foot.'

'No, he hasn't. Never mind the dog's foot—I've got a barb in my heart, if you want to know.'

'Ah, but I'm responsible for the dogs, and I'm not responsible for your heart.'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.'

'You said once, You'd married the wrong man——'

'I was speaking of poor old Tim. You know that' There was a touch of asperity in her voice. Break it up, an inner voice warned. Break it up, now!

'I wasn't thinking of your first husband.' Hendry plucked at the grass beside him, nervously. 'You don't belong with Vivian at all. You belong with me! We're the same generation, Diana, the kids that grew up in the War, hearing about the good old days (or the bad old days) and names like General Strike—Slump—Munich——'

'Vivian needs me. You don't realise it, because you haven't seen it, but he does.'

'And don't you need love?'

It was a target shot. Suddenly the winter fields, the black hedges, the spaniels' coats, dissolved in a haze of tears. He was reminding her that she'd been cheated of love, all her life, and even if she found it now, it would be

illicit. She tried to hang on to her resolutions—running her home, pleasing her husband, Alice. And after all, what was love, that she'd dreamed about, and chased, and missed? A letter on a doormat, a telephone ringing, a man's lips making promises. It was faith and heartbreak and perhaps poverty. For her, it had only meant the effort of adaptation to another person. Bending the bow, because the string wouldn't yield. Giving more than she got. Oh, she didn't grudge giving—it was having her gift thrown back in her face.

Hendry, naturally, tried to follow up his advantage by kissing her, but she pushed him away. After all, whatever love was, Hendry couldn't bring it to her. She was at a loose end, and desirable. And possession of her was the one weapon Hendry might really use against his father. Of the two men, she preferred the unloving Vivian to the meaningless love of Hendry.

She stood up and raced downhill towards the chimneys of Sawley Lodge, recognising the kitchen and library and the hall, which smoked. The wind was cold and astringent in her face, and the dogs, delighted with the game, kept beside her. Hendry shouted her to wait, and stop, but she ran even faster. Across the lawns and up the shallow steps, she burst open the front door and rushed into the house. The hall was hot and airless after the hill, and her crêpe shoes slowed her up on the polished floors. She threw open the library door and flopped in the nearest chair, the dogs at her feet. She felt wonderfully light hearted. The physical escape from Hendry had been fun. 'Sin I fro love escaped am so fat!' It was something Hendry had read to her, the other day, and she hadn't realised it was so funny.

Vivian was standing in the window, opening a bottle. He looked surprised at her entrance, in a constrained sort of way. 'Dear me, Diana. How boisterous you are to-day!'

'Oh, I can't always be watching my exits and my entrances. What are you doing home on a Thursday?

No, don't tell me. Mix me a drink. It's nice to see you, anyway.'

'I telephoned I was coming. Buller said you were busy. Your Mrs. Corrie was here a moment ago. I imagined you'd invited her. But she said, No, she'd just dropped in. I can't think what she wanted.'

'To tell you I was out for a walk on the shooting range with Hendry and the dogs. I expect she funked it, when she actually saw you.'

'Hendry? What's he doing here?'

'I imagined you'd invited him,' mimicked Diana. 'I didn't. Anyway, I gave him lunch, then took him to walk it off. Only he's rather slow.'

Vivian growled, not really interested. 'Coming all this way for lunch! I was talking to Bryce and Connell about him only this week. He's not pulling his weight in the foundry.'

'Well, perhaps he ought to have taken an Arts degree, or something,' Diana protested mildly. She felt so safe, now, she could even afford to defend Hendry. 'As you say, your father and grandfather had such ability between them, and you have such personality—you can't all be equally outstanding.' She pulled Spanker's ears and he thrust an adoring chin on her knee. 'I think I'll go and change.'

'Hendry is my son, my heir.' It was Vivian's gramophone record. Knowing Hendry, Diana felt Vivian only said it to bolster his own faith in his son. She thought of the younger boy, the Hal that Alice raved about, that she'd promised to meet. She hoped for the sake of the Carter Foundry that Hendry would marry and produce a son like the old grandfather.

She stood up, upsetting the spaniel. 'Since Hendry's here, do we invite him to dinner, too?'

'I've no objection—provided he has a decent dinner-jacket to wear.'

But Hendry, when he arrived, puzzled and panting, had no change of clothes nor, once he knew Vivian was in the

house, any desire to stay. He took a rather curt farewell of both of them, and drove away. But Diana knew he'd be back.

It all led back to Alice, in the end. Hendry, after a short interval, appeared again, bringing flowers and the more pleasing side of his personality, and Diana was bored enough to forgive him. Nothing was said about the moment on the shooting range. Rain immobilised them, and Hendry suggested dancing to the radio, or a film.

'We could be in Fleet in ten minutes. Or Reading in half an hour. I can't think why you don't have a small car.'

'I can't drive,' Diana said weakly.

'Oh, nonsense! You could learn.'

'I don't think Vivian would like me for a pupil—he's such a perfectionist. And Abel has no time, now Vivian takes him to Town with him.'

'Then I'll teach you—on my car. Don't you realise that if you could drive, you could nip over and visit your Alice as often as you liked? Ever thought of that?' It was so simple that Diana hadn't. She'd accepted non-driving as one of her limitations, like golf. Now Hendry had revived her ambition, and she was all enthusiasm to learn. 'I'll risk a few bumps and scratches on my paint—for you, Diana. Of course, I wouldn't do it for any other woman!'

'You don't know any other woman,' she teased. 'Not one who wants to learn to drive, I bet!'

'And I warn you I shall require payment in kind.'

'What's that?'

'You'll have to be kind to me! Look, the rain's easing. I'll give you your first lesson this afternoon. You'll need a coat.'

She was grateful. For his good humour, for the excuse to get out of the house, where she felt the servants were always listening to them, for the opportunity of learning. Prinny visited Alice at school. Diana, in giving her permission, hadn't realised she was giving Prinny the oppor-

tunity of mattering more to Alice than she did herself. Since realising it, she'd resented it. Prinny had so much, she felt. Her freedom, Vivian eating out of her hand—now Alice, too. She followed Hendry out to the wet gravel drive, where his car stood. The driving seat needed no adjusting for her long legs.

'Look, Hendry—mechanically I'm a fool—so don't tell me how it works. Just tell me what I do.'

'Very well. Forget the thing called the engine. I suppose most women drivers do, anyway. You haven't even a gate gear to worry about. Just kick the clutch and move that lever to what it says.' He put an arm along the back of her seat, and she couldn't reasonably object. 'Gently does it.' She got the car in motion, and they moved off.

It was perfectly easy after all, she found. You started, you accelerated, you stopped. Sometimes the car stalled itself, and once it climbed on to the grass verge for no apparent reason, but it was good fun. Up and down the drive they went, round by the cottages (Gabriel's stood empty, since the silly business with the Lagonda) and back to the front door. Diana pulled up, and Hendry was loud in his praises.

'You've driven before. You must have!'

'Indeed I haven't. I never got the chance. You see, after Daddy died, there was no car, and——'

'Well, if this car were a horse, I'd say you had wonderful hands. You're a natural!'

'That's all very well, but suppose I met another car. I've never been on a road. Suppose I had to go round Piccadilly Circus?'

'Oh, jump your hedges when you come to them!' They both giggled at the unsuitable metaphor, and Diana bent her head to his lighter, her black hair falling on her shoulders. She caught him twisting a curl of it round his

■ 'Now, Hendry—don't spoil it all.'

■ Fortunately, there's nothing to spoil—yet.'

'It's four o'clock. Come in and have some tea before

you go.' She jumped out of the car, and he had to follow her.

Next time he came, she wanted to drive to the village.

'You ought to get one of those provisional licences first.' He didn't want Vivian to hear he'd been joy-riding with Diana when Professor Connell was complaining about his work at the foundry.

'Oh, bother. Then I can't go on a road yet.'

'Of course you can. I'll drive you to a quiet spot. There are lots of lanes you can practise on. I just don't recommend going through the village.'

'Well . . . this is on your head. You'll have to look after me, and get me back by dusk. What's that case on the back seat?'

'My dinner-jacket. I'm a natural optimist, you see. I keep thinking you're going to ask me to stay to dinner again.'

'But, Hendry . . . you have to drive back I don't know how many miles when you leave here——'

'Of course I don't. I stay in Town.'

The reply worried her. Not that Hendry stayed odd nights in London, but his absences from the foundry. She didn't want them blamed on her. They drove out of the gates in silence. Diana glanced at her wrist-watch. 'Find a quiet stretch somewhere near. I don't want to be late back.'

But either by accident or design, Hendry's geography let him down badly, and it was nearly dusk when he let Diana take over. A light rain was falling, and the screen wipers ticked like metronomes before her eyes.

'Diana, are you hypnotised? You're driving from side to side of the road! Good thing nothing's coming. Be careful, though. Here, better have your side-lights on.' He switched them on.

Diana stopped the car. 'You take over, it's time I was home. And I don't feel ready to drive in the dark, yet. If I met another car, I'd be paralysed. Like a rabbit.'

Hendry scoffed at the idea. 'They're supposed to dip. Anyway, it's good practice.'

'I'd rather learn in daylight.'

'All right. We'll come out to-morrow.'

'But, Hendry . . . don't you ever work?'

'Does Vivian?'

'You accused Vivian once of not working for a living, and you're doing just the same yourself—'

'Only I haven't his vivid personality? Is that what you're trying to say? One law for the Vivians of this world—and another for the Hendrys.' His tone was hectoring, unpleasant.

Diana said firmly, 'I don't want to interfere with your job. Neither do I want to be blamed for keeping you from it.'

He sulked at once. 'That's right. Take away the only pleasure I ever get. Condemn me to my grindstone. You don't care.'

'I think you're being rather silly.' She really did. Funny how she turned to Hendry in boredom, and he always finished by boring her. 'Let's go home.'

'Tip and run. You haven't changed.'

'Why should I change? To you—anyway?'

'Why shouldn't you change? Why shouldn't you wake up and live?' Rodney, angered by her once, had said the same thing. 'Was it an accusation men always made, when they were getting nowhere with a woman? 'Who are you scared of now—the neighbours?' They'd changed places, and Hendry was idling along the deserted lane. Dark ploughland stretched for miles on either side of them. Wet hedges held them on their course. She'd never been out so late with Hendry before, and the servants would talk.

'Can't you drive faster? I'll be late home.'

His answer was to stop the car and switch off the lights. 'You're scared of my father, that's all.'

She didn't want to argue, and prolong the delay. 'We've been out quite long enough. I want to go home.'

'I'll take you back in a minute. Give me a kiss, first.'

'No!'

'Supposing I take one?'

'Supposing I object?' Silly, silly deadlock she was thinking. This is the sort of situation that happens to teenagers. This man's my stepson! And he's terrified of Vivian——

But Hendry had grabbed her and was kissing her violently. Diana felt her hair mussed and her necklace twisted. Her lipstick must be in smears across her cheek. She was furious—with Hendry, and a little with herself, for having put herself into such a situation. 'For God's sake, stop. Think of Vivian——'

'Damn Vivian!' Hendry muttered, bold with his own success. 'Forget him, and think of me! Oh, Diana . . . my dream I've waited for . . . my white lily . . . my own.'

He was really hurting her, taking his own pleasure without considering hers. Tim had been grateful, Vivian utterly indifferent. Hendry just took. Selfishly and clumsily, he took. Only because you're safe in a dark car in a country lane, Diana thought scornfully, beating at his head and shoulders. She tried to twist away, but she was imprisoned in the front of the small car. You wouldn't do it in Vivian's house—you wouldn't dare.* You're just a bully, a cad. Of course, if she'd been as eager as he was, she wouldn't have bothered about the rights and wrongs of it. There is nothing so repulsive as unmatched desire. She pulled at his jacket, his hair, trying to stave off his demanding mouth. She reached out and touched the cold windscreen, the wheel—and something else. A small heavy tube that came away in her hand. She'd wrenched the fire extinguisher from its fastenings.

'Diana, I love you. I want you—your lips, your eyes, your hair that has a life of its own——'

'Will you stop it?' But he didn't hear her. He didn't say a word when she brought the fire extinguisher down on top of his shaggy head.

He slumped on to her shoulder and when she pushed

him away, he lay back in the driving seat with his mouth open.

Diana's first thought was that she'd killed Hendry. She must get help, and quickly. No! She must escape from the scene, remembering to take her scarf and bag, and get away across the fields. Think of an alibi. Wipe off fingerprints. She wanted a lawyer. No—a passport. She was groping for her bag when Hendry stirred.

Of course he wasn't dead. Stunned, outraged and determined to make the most of it.

'I'll tell my father! I want a doctor . . . stitches . . . help. . . . Never trust a bloody woman.' He called her a filthy name, but she didn't care. He was obviously very frightened, but she was becoming less so.

'Oh, be quiet, and get across to the other seat. I'll drive you home. Switch the lights on for me—and you'd better watch what I'm doing.' She got out and ran round the car, pushing at him till he moved over.

'I'm bleeding. Probably I'm bleeding to death!'

'Are you? Which switch is the ignition?'

Frowning at the road beyond the ticking wipers, she started slowly homewards, imagining obstacles at every yard. She held her breath. She had no idea where they were. Follow the lane to a signpost. Or Sawley Mill. Or London. Keep going. You won't see Hendry again. Don't answer him.

'Oh, get on, can't you? You needn't crawl. I can't find my cigarettes—I suppose you spilled them.'

'Watch what I'm doing.'

'I can't watch you. I feel faint.'

If she hadn't been concentrating on the car, Diana would have been tempted by Hendry's manlessness into hitting him again. She said 'Hush!' absently, and felt Hendry fumbling beside her. Probably she had upset his cigarettes—but there was no need to groan! Fortunately, the road was level, because she was too nervous to change gear. They followed the lane at a snail's pace till it joined the

main road, and Hendry told her to take the left. Cars were passing in both directions, and Diana was terrified. There was one on her tail, its headlights flooding her and the slumped Hendry.

'Ought to pull the blind down,' he muttered, but he didn't do it, and eventually they were overtaken.

'Bought the middle of the road, chum?' a voice shouted derisively in the darkness.

'For heaven's sake, keep on your own side.' Hendry might have told her earlier, she felt. Obeying too eagerly, she felt a roughness under the wheel. 'Get off the bank, you fool!'

They got to within a mile of the village without mishap, and then Diana recognised the familiar back of Mrs. Coombs walking along the edge of the road. There was no pavement, and, hearing a car behind her, she merely moved a little farther into the edge. She didn't look round.

But the sight of someone she knew was too much for Diana's nerves. Although she didn't want to be recognised, she began to shout. 'Mrs. Coombs! Mrs. Coombs!'

'Shut up! She'll see you.'

The woman turned, quite unable to see who had called her name. Diana's lights blinded her, and a second later the lights of an oncoming car blinded Diana. She lost her head, trying to give them both the widest berth.

Hendry was shouting at her, but his alarm only glazed her further. She shut her eyes and pulled the wheel over, determined to avoid Mrs. Coombs.

They crossed the road and crashed into the ditch on the far side. The oncoming car, unable to foresee such a manoeuvre, only avoided them by swinging on to their side and brushing Mrs. Coombs headlong into the wet grass, where she lay, unhurt and screaming.

The other car pulled up and turned its lights back on Hendry's car, which was ominously silent. Mrs. Coombs, important after her fright, scrambled up to help them. 'I was warned,' she kept saying. 'A voice called out—Ada Coombs, your time isn't yet! I heard it distinctly, warn-

ing me. It was an angel, with a silver trumpet, bending straight out of heaven!'

The driver (there were two men in the other car) thought she was raving, and offered her brandy. With difficulty, they got the door of Hendry's car open, and pulled out the occupants.

Hendry had been thrown violently against the wind-screen, and bruised and cut anew. He was unconscious, and there was no evidence of his being knocked out previously with the extinguisher. Diana was unconscious, too, but the steering wheel, in winding her, had at least saved her face. She was the first of the two to recover.

'Don't—tell—Vivian——' The eager face of Mrs. Coombs, her kitchen woman, was bending over her, drooling curiosity. It was a first-class scandal, unescapable, but undeserved. 'I never meant . . . Hendry . . . Oh, my God!' She began to cry. Behind Mrs. Coombs, strangers were talking. Men who wanted to fetch an ambulance, the police.

'Well, if it isn't Mrs. Carter—my Mrs. Carter——' Mrs. Coombs lost no time in identifying her, with triumph in her voice. 'And Mr. Hendry Carter, too! And they've got their luggage—I suppose they were eloping, while the captain's away—just like they do in the films!'

Mrs. Coombs swore afterwards that she'd no idea what she was saying, or that she was saying it aloud. She'd had a bad fright and a shaking, as Dr. Greenbanks confirmed, when he saw her. 'I'm a respectable working woman, I am. I didn't want to make trouble. Well, they were in such a hurry they nearly killed me, didn't they?'

The story was all over Sawley Mill that night, and it lost nothing in the telling. Vivian, summoned from Town, heard it from everyone—except the principals. Belatedly, and to their amazement, they learned that Vivian had accused them of running away together. He refused to see them, or to entertain any communication from them.

Neither of them ever set foot in Sawley Lodge again.

The first thing Diana knew, she was looking at the ceiling, and it was daylight. There was a horrid taste of blood in her mouth. She was alone, in a metal bed, in a strange room. She looked round, without sitting up. This was Sawley Cottage Hospital! She could see the front gates from where she lay, and the back of the board that told the outside world its visiting hours. She had persuaded Vivian to give a donation to its nurses' home during the summer.

Vivian! That was the person who mattered. What had Vivian said—for of course the hospital would have contacted him at once? Perhaps he'd already been to see her. Surely he'd send flowers. But there were no flowers in her room. Well, it was December. He'd have to send afar for roses—she knew he loathed chrysanthemums. Death's heads, he called them. He never attended funerals, he was scared of homœopathic magic, Hendry said.

Hendry! That idiot who'd caused it all. She hoped his father would give him a good talking to, and pack him back to his job, to stay there. She began to feel frightened about the car. That was the second car smashed up through her agency in three months. Not that it was her fault, this time, it was Hendry's. Would she have to face a dangerous driving charge? Had anyone else been hurt except herself?

The door opened, and a nurse came in. Not a pretty nurse, but a waspish-looking one. She grabbed Diana's wrist, and then took her temperature. 'You're awake, are you? Last? You were making such a fuss last night we gave you a draught. You're lucky. You should see some of those motor-cyclists we get brought in! The matron will see you, presently.'

'I wasn't riding a motor-bike. I was driving a car. And I'd like to see a doctor——'

'The doctors have finished their morning rounds, now. There's nothing the matter with you, except bruises. Here's your handbag, if you want to comb your hair. We sent to your house, but they haven't answered. The coat

you came in with's torn. . . . Bathroom next door. Leave it tidy, please.'

Diana got out of bed, and found she was in her underclothes. She dragged on the blue shapeless robe the hospital provided for such excursions. Except for the taste in her mouth, she felt all right. Her mind was full of Vivian. Would he come here, or wait for her at home? She wished she had some clean clothes and some make-up. Her mouth felt bruised.

The bathroom mirror let her down lightly. There was a cut inside her mouth that hurt, but no visible marks. One knee cut, and a soreness in the ribs where the steering wheel had caught her. She remembered the accident fairly well, and her anger against Hendry flamed. She supposed he was miles away now. But perhaps with a bruise where she'd hit him.

She came back and sat down on her bed. 'You're sure Mr. Carter hasn't asked for me?'

'Mr. Carter?' The nurse was hauling off sheets. 'He's in another room.'

What? Vivian was there, waiting for her?

'Oh, tell him to come in, please.' It was all right then, Vivian had forgiven her. He'd come to take her home.

'Mr. Carter's asleep. He's got four stitches in his chin, and a suspected fracture of the skull! He didn't ask for anyone.'

'Hendry! Oh . . . was Mr. Hendry Carter hurt, too?'

'Hurt? You nearly killed him! As I said, you're very lucky. Now get into bed for your lunch.' The woman glared censoriously, and left the room.

Diana re-ordered her mind. No message from Vivian—and Hendry here, a casualty. And . . . no clothes or answer from her home. She counted the money in her handbag—a little under four pounds. She opened the door and called to the nurse now chatting in her cubby-hole of a sluice room, 'I'm discharging myself. You'd better find someone and tell them. Will you get me my clothes?'

The nurse protested she couldn't. Diana threatened to

walk out in the blue robe. The woman asked her to wait, and she refused. There was nothing to wait for. With a last graceless shrug, the nurse produced her clothes from a locked cupboard. Diana threw the laddered stockings under the bed, and put on the other things. The coat wasn't badly torn, thank heaven. She walked out of the gates unchallenged, and into the nearest phone box. Buller sounded sympathetic, but he told her his master wasn't to be disturbed.

'What's the matter, Buller? Is he ill, too?'

'No, madam. The captain's in the library with Lord Barchester now. He's very well.'

'But I . . . I'm speaking from Fleet, Buller. Didn't you get a message from Sawley Cottage Hospital?'

'Yes, madam. Last night. If I may say so, I'm glad it wasn't serious, madam——'

'Buller, call Captain Carter to the phone at once.'

'I'm sorry. I have strict instructions he's not to be disturbed.'

Diana put the phone down, frightened. Vivian must be very angry. It never occurred to her then that the break was final. She went into a shop and bought a pair of stockings, replaced the lipstick which had disappeared from her bag, had a snack at a café, took a train to London, and a cheap room for the night. She was too dazed to be desperate, yet. She knew she must get some money, and a home for Alice, due back from school in three weeks' time. The only person she could think of was Prinny, and her proud, rejected Prinny. Her first idea was to rush into the first job that offered, and wait for Vivian to come round. Her second was to keep in touch with Hendry.

The next day she sold the watch that Vivian had given her for her wedding for twenty-eight pounds, and found a cleaner room. She began to ring the hospital daily, inquiring if Hendry was still there, but leaving no message. The girl on the switchboard was quite chatty. Eventually she told her that Hendry was to be discharged next day and had spoken on the telephone to friends in Rottingdean.

Diana was sitting on Brighton station when he got out of the train.

‘Hallo, Hendry. I’m glad you’re better.’

He looked astounded to see her. ‘What in the world are you doing here?’ His face was still discoloured.

‘Oh, I spent the night at the hotel opposite. This isn’t Victoria—I could hardly spend it on the station. Besides, it’s December. Now you’re here, we can both relax and get well. I like the sea.’

He stared at her, not understanding. ‘But . . . what about your husband—have you forgotten him?’

‘Certainly not. It was you who forgot my husband when you were forcing your attentions on me. But let’s go into the lounge of my hotel. The first thing to do is to make arrangements for Alice. Fortunately, there’s a school party going to Switzerland. . . . But come along, I can’t discuss family matters on a railway station!’

CHAPTER VII

VIVIAN, in accepting the story immediately current that Diana and Hendry were guilty lovers, precipitated his innocent wife into his son's arms. The punishment for that thoughtless car-ride was that Diana found herself utterly bound to Hendry, like Melissa to her wild horse. Only Hendry was no wild horse. In time, however, he became quite a useful one.

He was terribly upset at Vivian's anger. 'What shall I do?' he kept repeating, like a distracted, rumped parrot. 'My whole life . . . I don't know whether I'm coming or going. . . .'

'At the moment, you seem to be going—as far as the foundry's concerned,' Diana told him. Vivian had immediately prevailed on the other two directors to remove Hendry from his post. If he had been a better executive, they might have taken a different view and refused Vivian's arbitrary demand. As it was, they were relieved to have the excuse. It was not in Vivian's power to dispossess Hendry of his shares, so that his position rather than his income suffered, but he was very sorry for himself.

'Well, you've always wanted to be free of those dreadful Midlands—now's your chance,' Diana reminded him. 'You can paint, or write, or play the piano to your heart's content. Express the ego you're always talking about.'

'This is a terrible blow to my ego, on the contrary.'

'It hasn't exactly inflated mine. But I didn't realise you had money—whether you worked or not. Aren't you a lucky little man?'

Hendry shook his plastered head. 'There are some things money cannot buy,' he said sententially.

'Really? Vivian never found any. I think you told me that yourself once, by the way.'

Hendry buried his head in his hands. 'What a hard, cruel, unsympathetic woman you are!'

'I'm also an innocent one—don't forget that! And you're the only person who can prove it, but you're too scared of Vivian to go and tell him——'

'He won't see me.'

'Insist. Who are you scared of—the servants?'

'My mother died when I was born. I had a difficult childhood. My father expected impossible things of me. I won't take the blame for not achieving his ambitions.' Hendry seemed to think all this exonerated him from his present fault. 'I simply don't know what I'll do.'

'Then think for a moment what I'll do!'

Hendry passed a hand over his bruised face. 'You? What were you trying to do when it happened? Where were you taking me?'

'But . . . Don't you remember?'

'No. Not what happened immediately before the accident. I know I agreed to teach you to drive. . . . And you were driving when we hit something. . . .'

Diana thought it unnecessary to recall the events of that painful afternoon. If Hendry thought all the stitches in his scalp were due to the smash, well and good. She said more cheerfully, 'Well, here we are. The two of us. Out on our necks!'

'I might go to Paris and study painting seriously.'

'Very well. What do I do?'

'You?' Hendry stared at her. The idea that from now on Diana was his responsibility hadn't occurred to him.

'Of course. Me. You took me out in your stupid car, ruined my reputation, broke up my marriage—nearly killed me into the bargain! If Vivian divorces me, you'll have to marry me.'

'But . . . I hadn't thought of marrying you.'

'You probably haven't thought of anyone but yourself all your life, Hendry Carter. But I'll tell you what you're

going to do now. Either you go straight to your father to-night and convince him (convince him, mind!) that you were only teaching me to drive, and had no thought of eloping—or we elope, and you provide for me. I'm not going to be left between two stools. Not two Carter stools. I've got the future to think of.' The immediate future was Alice—her new term to be paid for, her music lessons, her classes. Diana was desperate. To fail Alice—now! To open the gates of promise, and close them in her face!

Hendry protested. 'But my money's tied up in securities. I don't know where to take you. I don't know where I'm going to be myself. And I don't want Alice. I've never wanted a stepdaughter. I really can't consider—'

'I won't disguise that you bore me, Hendry—and you'll probably bore Alice, too—but there's no reason why you shouldn't be useful. You're perfectly healthy and presentable. Nothing keeps you from working.'

'But . . . I'm not trained for anything. I mean, I was sort of born into the job I had. Here, you read Professor Connell's letter. I bet my father's behind it. It's a beastly letter! And God knows I've tried to please him.'

'I've read the letter, and I know Vivian's behind it. We're both untrained, but there's no reason to stay that way. We're only thirty, both of us. We can get a job together.'

'What as? I couldn't do anything . . . degrading, you know. My grandfather was Sir Howard Carter—'

'Nobody cares if your grandfather was Rob Roy!' Diana told him unkindly. 'And there's nothing degrading in work. We'll try for a job at a hotel. Or we might take a boarding-house, if you can untie enough capital. But the first thing you've got to do is to provide for Alice.'

'Don't speak to me like that,' squeaked Hendry. 'I won't be ordered about. . . . Pistol to my head. . . . Blackmail. . . .'

'Very well. Pick up that telephone and ring your father.'

Hendry gave in. He was scared, and the future yawned

blackly before him. His dilettante interests, the bright stars in his Midland sky, were very tiny points when they were all he had to light his way. Diana at least had a plan, and he had none. So he accepted her leadership.

A confused period followed, which she had difficulty in recalling afterwards. Hendry was sent to close his flat and pack his things. There was a useless exchange of letters with Vivian's lawyers. And the realisation at last that Vivian would neither see her, nor support her, nor divorce her.

'She's made her bed—let her lie in it.' He was furious with Hendry, too, but it was clear that she was held responsible for Hendry's lapse. His disgrace was meant to be temporary: when it hardened into habit Vivian made a belated approach to his son Hal, which was indignantly repulsed.

But Diana only heard about that years later. The first thing she had to do was to swallow her pride, and seek Prinny.

She hadn't seen Prinny for some time: not since she'd snubbed her over Alice's half-term. And now she had to beg her interest for Alice, until her affairs were straight, and she was able to offer her a home. There was no one else to ask. Vivian's friends had immediately cut her dead. It was no great loss, but it rankled as being undeserved.

Prinny didn't say, I told you so, but received her gaily, like a friend from a voyage. 'How lovely to see you again! I missed you. Do come in.' She left Diana to bring up the subject of her visit herself.

It was early spring, freak warm weather that would probably be followed by March gales and April frosts. The two women wandered round Prinny's suburban garden, examining poking bulbs and fruit blossom and the new rockery. 'Hal did the spadework, and Connie dropped bulbs in drilled holes. I know it's all wrong, but she can't bend, poor soul. I sat at the piano and played to them.

I'm a great believer in doing things to music—you can't be angry if the music isn't. Fancy disinheriting all your relations to the Blue Danube!'

'I haven't any relations,' Diana said glumly. If I had, I'd hardly be here to beg house-room for Alice, she thought.

'Music soothes the savage breast, they say——' Prinny chose not to hear her. 'Is your breast savage? I imagine it's sore. Come inside, and I'll play you something.'

'No. And please don't be flippant. I want to talk to you.' Diana was white as a witch on half-pay.

Prinny thought, pallor suits her. She is distinguished looking. But she needn't bite my head off. I've always liked her. I could spank her for this particular piece of foolishness, though! She said, 'Sorry, my dear. I was trying to put you at your ease. After all, I'm probably the only person in the world who doesn't believe that story about you and Hendry. If only for the reason that I know Hendry. Here, have some cake. Connie's home-made. No? Cigarette, then?'

'If you believe there was nothing between Hendry and me, will you tell Vivian so?' demanded Diana.

Prinny looked at the end of her cigarette, and then at her. 'No. Sorry. I agree it's a pretty crook business, but I can't interfere. There's no proof, you see——'

'There's no proof of anything between Hendry and me, either!'

'Well, of course there isn't. But that's Vivian's attitude. After all, he's nearly sixty, and he's been made a fool of, publicly. That's what it amounts to. I'll help impress your innocence on Alice—if it's necessary.' She looked at her guest shrewdly. 'You're not suggesting your heart's broken, are you? As far as Vivian's concerned?'

'No . . . not by this. Vivian broke my heart in the first months of our marriage. I honestly tried to care for him. And I did care! I so much wanted to.'

For a moment, Diana thought Prinny was going to say something about her own relationship with Vivian, something revealing, but she didn't. She stared at the sunlit

garden and the neighbouring roofs, and one of her Siamese cats dropped from the window-sill and ran to her with a glad cry. 'You're through with Vivian then?'

'He's through with me. The lawyers made that clear.'

'Then your only real problem is Alice?'

Diana burned her boats. 'Yes.' Her hands tightened in her lap, this was what she'd come to ask. 'Would you be really lion-hearted, and take her for the time being? I know I was pretty rude to you at Sawley, but actually——'

'Oh, that? Skip it.' Prinny got up and sat down again at the piano. There was a curious vase on top of it that Alice had made—a similar one presented to Diana had been banished to the attics at Sawley. Vivian saw nothing pleasing in asymmetrical clay unless Picasso did it, and Diana had agreed at the time. Now she felt jealous of Prinny.

'Look, Diana, I'd take Alice whether you were guilty of an affair with anyone, or not—for Alice's sake.' She played an arpeggio with her large, strong hands. 'I like Alice. I know she likes me. We're happy together—without trying. The same things make us giggle. We like the same foods, the same films. We're shocked at cruelty. We get a kick out of Christmas giving. In fact, we're plain ordinary. We don't aspire to heights of taste and culture and say witty things every time we open our mouths. But she has a family here, where she can belong——'

'I do appreciate everything you've ever done for Alice. She thinks the world of you.'

Prinny acknowledged this gravely. 'I also appreciate that you had the dice loaded against you with Vivian. And possibly before that. But you can't juggle with a child's happiness——'

'Of course not.' What was the woman driving at?

'So I can't take Alice conditionally. I can't take her till you've got something to do, somewhere to live, somebody else to live with. Either I take her absolutely—or not at all.'

'My God, I can't give my daughter away like . . . like a food parcel!' Diana was furious.

Prinny played another arpeggio, slowly this time. 'You can't come here for favours, and make terms, Diana. If Alice was a baby, I'd stipulate that you were never to see her. But she's eleven, and she loves you, and it would be unkind to remove one of the few sources of affection the poor kid's got. No, don't get mad—I'm not saying you're not a good mother. I think you are. But you have certain limitations at the moment—principally you have nowhere but a lodging house to take the child to, when her term ends. Give me Alice, and come and see her here, every holidays! I'll take entire charge, pay her bills, contact you in case of illness, or any special decision. But this is to be her home!'

Diana gasped. 'Give up my daughter? For ever? See her only on sufferance? But I haven't done anything to deserve that. I love Alice——'

'Try and see it, not as a punishment on yourself, but an opportunity for her. A child needs a home and people. Stable people. Security. Anchors to come back to.'

'I gave her a home, and . . . and . . .'

'Vivian. Yes, I know you tried, but you didn't really get his measure. You can try with Hendry—but do you really see Hendry as a stepfather for anyone?' She played three chords. 'Ten years ago, I took my son away from Vivian, because he was just beginning to imitate people around him. Hendry lived with us, then. No, I'm not going to tell you he'd got a secret vice—he isn't interesting enough—he's merely vicious. Feebly so, like a dog that would bite if it dared. I didn't think a child was safe with him.'

'I can't give up Alice.'

'Very well. Make her dependent on Hendry. Take her to live with him. At least, she respected Vivian.'

'Did you lie awake at nights, thinking this out?' Diana asked her bitterly. 'You're the only woman Vivian ever cared about. Now you want to take Alice from me, too.'

'As far as Vivian is concerned, neither I nor anyone can take from you something which you never had!' She began a scherzo with her strong left hand, as if to mark her impatience. 'Alice's transfer here will be quite painless—to her.'

'Adoption—or nothing?'

'That's crudely put. Most adopters don't consider the feelings of the parting parent at all. They want exclusive rights. I'm leaving you a loophole.'

'I'd be a very embarrassed guest, entertained for my daughter's sake, wouldn't I?'

'You need not be. You're welcome here.'

'You don't give me much choice——' Diana thought of Alice back in Shepherd's Bush, tearing posters off hoardings and deflating the tyres of unattended bicycles. Of her discontent and discouragement. Her pleas to go back to school. Alice growing tall—still in Shepherd's Bush—giggling with her friends from the factory, whistled at by men. Alice in love at last . . . with someone Diana couldn't stand. With someone who'd have come to the Monroes' back door. Alice, growing like her husband, like her mother-in-law. Parking her children and going back to the factory, for a little bit more housekeeping, and all the fun she ever got. Could her love for the child conquer the material disadvantages? Dared she risk her with Hendry (and she certainly meant to make Hendry pay for the trouble he'd caused)? Dared she refuse the background Prinny offered, the asset she'd always thought was so important?

'Nevertheless, you must choose,' Prinny reminded her. 'You, not Alice, mind. It's not fair to put the burden on a child—she can't weigh abstract and material advantages. But if you're thinking of establishing yourself with Hendry Carter, I'd advise—again for her sake, not for mine—give her to me.' She began to play the Blue Danube, properly.

'I don't see why Hendry shouldn't make good some of the damage he's done.' Diana had to raise her voice above the music.

'No more do I.' Prinny sounded delighted to agree. 'But remember what I said about his character—and Alice is a girl!'

She told Diana to think it over, but Diana knew the battle lost already. She and Prinny changed places in Alice's life as gracefully as possible, just as they'd changed places in Vivian's. Prinny and Herald and Connie and Alice made a family, with Diana in the dark outside. But it was done so gently, Alice didn't really realise what had happened.

She came to see Alice from time to time (Prinny being scrupulously tactful, and Hal always taking himself off), but the visits were dutiful, rather than pleasant. Diana pretended to a gaiety she didn't feel, and Alice was shy and constrained. The child was obviously happy in Prinny's home, and Prinny's care of her beyond praise.

Alice grieved at first about the gulf widening between her mother and herself. While she accepted Prinny's calm assurance of her mother's innocence, and Diana's violent one, the whole business shocked her deeply. Alice didn't mean to be cruel. She couldn't help her feelings. Grown-ups (especially those one adored and respected) shouldn't do those sort of things. Her mother had let her down.

Diana was glad to be spared meeting Hal. She couldn't forget who his father was.

Within a very short time, Diana had found a job for herself and Hendry—as managers of a restaurant owned by a catering company. It provided a certain wage and accommodation, urgently necessary now that Vivian had claimed her jewels and stopped her allowance. Diana talked them both into the job. She had years of business experience (she pointed out) and though neither of them knew much about catering, they were young and willing to learn. Hendry trailed round after her, a piece of luggage clearly marked NOT WANTED ON VOYAGE. He was present at the necessary interviews, but he hardly opened his mouth.

'But I don't know a thing about catering,' he protested

afterwards. 'Or bookkeeping. Or staff. I've only handled workmen—'

'Don't worry so much. I'll cope. I'm good at figures.'

'Well, I've never been inside a kitchen—'

'Now's your chance.'

Hendry made a last effort. 'I thought only foreigners kept restaurants. Wops and Greeks. Must we live on the premises? Supposing someone I knew came in—?'

Diana told him to be quiet, and leave all arrangements to her. They were a presentable young couple, and Diana's enthusiasm carried the day. Enough to get them a trial, anyway.

'But what do I have to put down £500 for? It isn't a bit convenient. Do they think we're going to steal the teaspoons?'

'Fidelity bond. It's quite usual. And the licence had better be in your name. It'll look better.'

'What licence?'

'To sell intoxicating liquors to be consumed on the premises,' Diana explained patiently. 'We can't sell food without drink. That's what's been wrong with this place. I made them see that at once. You apply at the next Quarter Sessions—I'll brief you. Don't pull faces, and please don't argue.'

'I think the whole thing's degrading.'

'You can always go back to those Midlands and look for another job in steel.'

'And you—standing behind a bar! Like a . . . bar-maid.'

'You forget, I was a cigarette-girl once.'

'A bar's worse,' wailed Hendry. 'It's the end.'

'Not at all. Behind a bar, the customers can't stroke your legs!' But she realised, as soon as she saw the place, that Prinny had been right. It was no home for Alice. And apart from Hendry, she had no time, no privacy for a child.

They were known as Mr. and Mrs. Carter, and were assumed to be married to each other. Only Vivian's friends

(who weren't customers, anyway) knew that they were Mr. Hendry Carter and Mrs. Vivian Carter. It was strictly a business arrangement, as Diana told Hendry when they arrived, one wet spring day in a strange suburb, surrounded by cases and parcels, the salvaged flotsam of their lives. 'Here's your room, and your key, and I don't care what you do with your spare time! As long as you're pleasant to customers, and don't paw the waitresses. Or get tight.' For Hendry, unlike his father, had a poor head for liquor.

Hendry looked quite suicidal. Diana had to grin. 'Oh, cheer up, do, Hendry! Look, this is a new venture—with new problems, new people—it's going to be fun! It's going to be a success, too—if only to show Vivian.' She dragged him round the unswept premises, pointing out what was to be cleaned and altered. She poked in cupboards, checked lists, tried switches, opened windows. Her high heels tapped on the bare staircase, her laughter bubbled in every room. She was a girl again, animated, desirable. Hendry tried to encircle her waist, but she ducked away, laughing. 'This place is a gold-mine—we only have to work it. You'll see.' She unlocked a cupboard with her new keys. 'And somebody's left half a bottle of gin! Let's celebrate!'

At first Hendry was miserable. The days were the longest and blackest in his life. His work had all been done at a quiet desk before. He'd been free to go out, have a drink, summon people by telephone, or relax with a literary review between progress charts. But he wasn't the boss's son any more. He was the boss's husband.

He didn't realise it all at once. He was happy when the place was full of people, and someone congratulated him on a dish, or the new lighting, or the service. He took all credit willingly, and began to enjoy his rôle as landlord. He was even overheard to say, 'Oh, my wife gives me a hand at times, but it takes a man to run a business.'

Vivian might have done something more positive about them when his anger cooled, had his health been better. The week after the accident, he sent for his solicitors to

come to Sawley, rejected their advice, and worked himself into a white rage. They left him at last, and he poured himself the usual whisky. He never drank it. Buller found him with his head in the wide hearth, in another of his 'faints'.

Dr. Greenbank took cardiographs, and suggested a consultation. The London man only confirmed his opinion. Vivian was living on borrowed time. No whisky, no worry, no sudden movements. Vivian engaged the chauffeur that Diana had been denied.

He sent imploringly for Prinny to come and see him, and his doctors seconded the appeal.

But Prinny knew her Vivian. 'If you want advice, get your lawyers. If you're ill, make your peace with your wife and son. I'm not your wife—and I haven't forgotten that you couldn't be bothered with Hal, when he was ill once.'

'We all make mistakes,' Vivian protested. She didn't know that he was telephoning from his bed. Oh, how he hated lying in bed! Nobody came to him but doctors and hirelings. His friends made excuses. Outside the sun shone.

'Of course. But there's no need to keep to them.'

'Then you won't come?'

'We'll meet when you're better. You know we always like each other better in company.'

Privately, she telephoned Diana. 'I'm not saying too much, but I imagine there's a hope of reconciliation. Are you interested?' She was going to add that Vivian sounded pretty bad on the phone.

But Diana only noticed that Prinny had been favoured with the news, not herself. 'I'm afraid it's a bit late—now.' Her voice was crisp, decisive.

'Well, what do you want?'

'I want a good head-waiter—English, for preference—and a line in novelties for a dance. Vivian, did you say? Well!'

'Where's Hendry? Shouldn't he know?'

'Out at the back, helping the brewers. He's as happy as a sandboy. Thinks he runs this place. Oh, if his father has any proposition, it can be put to him, of course. But since he'll ask me what he's to do about it . . . ' Priny could hear her telling someone to carry chairs and not drag them like that. She was polite, but her voice had a new authority, and she sounded busy. 'Hallo, are you there? Will you thank Alice for the flower painting? I'm having it framed for my room. Tell her I'm writing.'

That was the end of the conversation about Vivian.

His health improved somewhat, but not his temper. He stopped the subterfuges of youth, and achieved a certain dignity with his own white hair, and lean lined face. The many mirrors disappeared from the house. So did Diana's clothes, when the women servants left. Vivian spent most of his time at Sawley alone, listening to radio music and chatting eagerly to anyone who had time for him. He was willing enough now to take his place as squire of Sawley Mill, but he couldn't ride or shoot. He couldn't even play golf. He knew nothing of crops and cricket, and he still didn't have to worry about taxes. He really didn't fit into the simple, serious, week-day life of Sawley Mill. The rowdy week-end parties finished when Diana left, for no servant was willing to undertake the work she'd done, planning, clearing and ensuring the guests' comfort. Colonel Corrie dropped in from time to time, and made the mistake of talking to Vivian 'for his own good'. He left hurriedly. There was no more brandy for the colonel—and no more visits for Vivian. Nobody else had time.

When he'd finished being angry with Diana, there was very little to remember her by. He hadn't bothered to know her as a person. She was young and beautiful, and she'd upset him . . . but she wasn't the only high-powered young woman who'd flashed into his life and out again. Of course, he hadn't married the others, that was the only difference. Of his eight months with her, only a pile of photographs remained. Not an intimate memory. Not a letter. The jewels he'd clasped so proudly on her lay

in the safe, a lifeless pile of coloured stones. Mrs. Coombs enjoyed a brief notoriety in the village, till she stumbled over her own doorstep, and broke her leg. She came to look on the weary months in plaster as a judgment, and nobody contradicted her.

Vivian was appalled to learn that his son managed licensed premises. He didn't care that Hendry was working hard and making a success of his reedy life at last. He blamed Diana for his choice, his success, and his continued estrangement from his father. 'Damn the woman! Making trouble. My son a publican—faugh! Faugh, Abel. Get me a whisky, there's a good fellow——' He was addressing a nephew of Buller's, brought into service when Abel, who looked like a living mummy, was found one morning, a dead one. Vivian himself looked like a retired pirate, empty of everything but spleen. 'Carter of Carter's Foundry, Abel. That's where the money comes from, isn't it? Hey, isn't it, man?'

'Yes, sir,' said young Buller, woodenly.

'Belong to what they call the Trade, with a capital T.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Here, give me that whisky.'

'No, sir. Sorry, sir. Doctor's orders, sir.'

'Damn it, man, a small one won't kill me.'

But Buller stuck to his guns. Nor was he scared of losing his job. There wasn't much competition to work at the large, quiet house and share the captain's sunset.

For some time Vivian's lawyers had been on to him to make a will, but changing his depositions, threatening people and cutting them out, was Vivian's last weapon. Wills are the blackmail of the old, but apart from the servants, he had no dependants. Diana was out, and Prinny, since she wouldn't advise him. Hendry had failed to creep back, and Herald had refused to. His kinsman, Lord Barchester, was dead. He could endow a scholarship, of course, but he had no academic interests. Or a trophy for motor racing (he got as far as having some designs submitted, and threw them out). He thought of ploughing

his money back into the foundry, somehow. Perpetuate the name of Carter—any Carter. He remembered Alice Kimmidge vaguely. Demure and obedient, and young. Ah, youth! Delicious, hurrying youth. As long as he'd surrounded himself with it, he'd had the illusion of sharing it. His hands trembled and his chin sank. What was the good of anything—money, authority, women, racing—if you couldn't enjoy it? He was so deep in self-pity that even his needy and expectant friends spaced their visits.

Prinny saw him once, and was shocked. The man had disintegrated so far, and stuck. He talked of plans that had matured or aborted twenty years ago, and the high hopes he had of Hendry at his prep school. There was nothing she could do, except listen and comfort him, but he was angry when she rose to go. She supposed he thought they were still married! She didn't mention the visit to Diana. There was no point.

Not that Diana would have had time for Vivian. If he had honestly forgotten her, her pride had forgotten him. She was working up the business, known as the Caraval, into a tremendous success.

CHAPTER VIII

ALICE KIMMIDGE reached into the tepid pond and dragged the leaf towards her. Its stem was like old rubber tubing, slimy and smelly.

'They're horrid underneath,' she called. 'They're dirty. But you can just imagine Rumpelstiltskin sitting on the leaves.' Her reflection swayed in the disturbed water, and a pond beetle, swimming for all its back legs were worth, scudded across it and away. Funny, she was thinking, even when you held your breath, how your mirrored face played tricks—smirked and wobbled and blew bubbles at you. And you realised too late that you shouldn't wear pink with your sunburn, and you'd probably lose your mother's locket again, as it hung out from your neck over the water, and when you retrieved it, the faded face of a lady called Mrs. Monroe, who was your grandmother, would be even more unrecognisable. And now you needn't wear glasses all the time, you missed them, and hid behind sunglasses, which Hal hated, and he threatened to give you a white stick and a tray of matches. . . . 'Was Rumpel-thingummy a man or a girl? I can't remember.'

'Thumbelina, wasn't it?'

'Was it?' Alice was now trying to put the leaf back in the space she'd made, and it didn't quite fit. It meant moving a dozen leaves, and their twined stems, and the lotus pink flowers were still out of reach, in the centre. . . . Her companion came nearer, and Alice's breath became so short and her hands so clumsy that her mirrored face broke up completely in streaks of pink and green. 'Oh, botheration!' she wailed.

'If you think you can defy the laws of gravity and lean across the face of the waters . . . you're in for a surprise,

a wet one!' Another face, a dark one, appeared beside her own when it re-formed on the surface. 'And your locket thing's gone. Again!' A bared arm reached through the mirrored faces and explored the concrete bottom, twenty inches down. 'I've got it! What's inside, by the way? A lock of your true love's hair?'

'Of course not,' retorted Alice hotly, her sunburn suddenly more noticeable. 'It's just an old thing Mummy had. She gave it to me when she married.' She received her treasure back again, dripping. 'Oh, thank you. Thank you.'

Vivian's turnip had grown at last into a rose. A wild rose, humble and delicate, with a pastel charm and no pretensions. Alice had gained poise with her inches, discarded the pigtails that looked wired on, the unbecoming centre parting, the dresses that were merely made for easy ironing. Nowadays it was harder to glimpse Alice's knees than a Victorian ankle, but her full high bosom emphasised her neat little waist. Her brows had darkened a little, giving her face character. The overall impression was just a happy, well-scrubbed teenager. A wild rose of a girl, open in the sun. In love for the first time.

Love hadn't dimmed her eye nor affected her appetite. It made her ridiculously vulnerable, secret and charming. It floored her with blackest agony, it catapulted her to the discovery of new stars. It was wonderful and awful. Alice herself marvelled how she could suffer so much and look so healthy. Prinny, who'd seen it coming for years, took the miracle in her stride. If it was mutual, she wasn't going to interfere. She had long given her ward Alice the affection and understanding that might have been Diana's.

'They were better last year.'

'What were better?' asked Alice, with the utter stupidity of those in love. 'Are you—I mean—do you—which?'

'What are you blathering about, you donkey?' inquired the young man beside her, who was still talking about the water lilies. 'The pink ones, and the large white things.'

I suppose they have a two-year cycle, or something. Come on, don't you want any tea?'

'Lots,' admitted the love-lorn Midge. 'I ought to have gone in and helped, I suppose.'

'Oh, Mother can cope. Anyway, Connie lays up trays for a week before she goes out. She doesn't trust us to feed ourselves. Thinks we're morons——'

'No!' How could anyone mistake the beloved Prinny and wonderful Hal for morons? Midge, perhaps—but not the n. Either leaning over the pond, or the strength of her feelings, flushed her face anew. Hal, watching her patiently, imagined it was the sun, and marvelled for the thousandth time at the softness of her skin.

He was aware, less urgently, less intensely than she was, that their relationship had changed. Alice was no longer the dear little nitwit who belonged in the family since his mother had scooped her under a firm protective wing, some seven years ago. He still basked in her admiration, allowed her to fetch and carry, teased her and championed her and tried to teach her, from time to time, the necessary facts of life—golf and canasta and boogey. But Alice had recently been reclassified under the exciting heading of Woman. It was now necessary to compliment her and seek her favours, instead of kindly bestowing his own. Only he wasn't used to it yet, and sometimes slipped back to the old ways.

The Army had returned Herald Carter, known as Herald Lunt, to his mother a week ago, with more muscles and shorter finger-nails than he'd ever had. It bawled at him and exercised him: kicked him out of bed at sunrise (and in the middle of the night, too, for manoeuvres). It had sickened him of puddings and root vegetables and strong tea. It had taught him to square his shoulders and hold his tongue. And for the first time the handsome, somewhat spoiled Hal opened appreciative eyes to civilian life, the comforts of his home, the fastidiousness of his womenfolk. The Army was a test he felt he'd come through rather well, and he could afford to relax.

'Race you to the house,' he told the dreaming girl, forgetting the reclassification.

Alice looked ready to cry. 'No, Hal. I'm grown up!' Only she didn't sound it. She was sure now he'd noticed her unhappy choice of a pink dress.

'Then allow me, ma'am.' He bowed and offered his arm with exaggerated courtesy, and when she looked at him, not knowing what to do, drew her arm through his and walked her back to the house. Not from an access of feeling, but to make sure she came. Midge, alone, would probably have sat down on the cement rim of the pond and started dreaming again, or twisting her hair, or humming. She was always smiling at her thoughts, or starting when he spoke to her, and her letters (in which she wrote minutely of everything except herself) had taken hours to read. . . .

But Herald Lunt, who was twenty, was ready to make allowances for the adolescent Midge. After all, she'd only left school last term. It must have been quite a wrench. . . .

'You've grown,' he approved, when she stood up beside him. She came up to his chin, making him feel pleasantly superior. Seeing that such a simple remark made her gasp with pleasure, he amplified it. 'Yes, you've grown—quite pretty!'

But this was too much for poor Midge, who retreated into boorish-seeming silence. Hal began to think about his tea.

A month later, Herald Lunt leaned on the bar of the Caraval and listened absently to his friend Barson extolling the merits of his new M.G. He was in the intriguing position of knowing the history of the managers, whereas they had no idea at all who he might be. If his new interest in Alice had led him there, he wouldn't admit it. The Caraval was on his way—it was bright—it was open—he found a dozen excuses for dropping in, which he'd never done before.

He was watching the manager now, a weak but pleasant man, young still, dressed neatly like a floor-walker in a big store (haberdashery was the word that occurred to Hal), scuttling among the tables at the far end of the bar, placing menus, displacing menus, counting places, speaking to a waitress, pausing to dab his thinning hair in front of one of the mirrors, unaware that he was the object of scrutiny.

'I say, you're not listening——' There was infinite reproach in his friend's voice. 'I tell you, I came down from Cambridge to Hyde Park Corner in two hours flat—I can't say it all again.'

'I believe you, old man. Every word.' The manager had disappeared through swing doors. Next moment he shot out again, collided with a waitress, and scurried back to Diana, apparently for instructions. Dismissed at once, he went through the doors again, and appeared no more.

'I say, you know old Potty Roper?'

'Yes.'

'No, you don't. You're not listening. I say, you're not in love, are you?'

It wasn't a question Hal chose to answer. Nor one he thought as funny as the questioner did. He looked down the restaurant (the lights dimmed to show the service had not yet begun) and said Yes and No at intervals as Peter Barson talked.

The manageress was talking to a middle-aged couple who wanted (as far as Hal could overhear them) to book the Gala Room for their daughter's coming-of-age party. He could see her over the man's shoulder, glancing from one to the other as she talked, tapping a silver pencil in her long fingers, not impatiently, but as if she'd forgotten it in her greater interest in the girl, the guests, the little speech the father wanted to make. There was a mirror behind her, and when she turned her head, he saw her profile was still that of a girl, though not in the least like Alice. He'd heard of Diana's beauty till he was sick of it, and came prepared to judge it severely. He'd expected a ship-

launching face, but not one so pleasant. To his extreme annoyance he found himself blushing, and took a long fierce swig at his beer.

Hal always thought he'd been rather clever in doubting his mother's version of Diana's flight with Hendry Carter, but now he wasn't so sure. People were victims of circumstance sometimes. There'd been that awful moment under canvas, when a chap in his tent had lost his wallet and accused Herald. Useless to say he hadn't seen it, didn't need it, wouldn't touch his confounded wallet with a barge pole. He'd been the only soldier in the tent. Circumstantial evidence. Not till the wallet was picked up in the mess and restored to its owner could he breathe again. It could have been the same with Alice's mother. It couldn't have been love. Anyone watching the busy little manager could see he was only her lieutenant, and he bored her stiff.

For Alice's sake, he'd always pretended to accept the story of Diana's innocence. Now he did accept it, fully and without reserve. It made him wonder how she'd felt about his father, if Hendry was not her lover after all. Had his father bored her, too? Or had she loved him? He disliked his father intensely (though without knowing him personally). He had to admit it must have been awful for her if she had loved him, and he wouldn't believe her. . . . It was difficult to understand the motives of another generation, Hal thought wisely. Difficult to realise what anyone but himself had ever discovered, and wondered, and loved.

The Caraval was not a remarkable place, and depended very much on the personality of those who ran it. Which meant Diana's personality, since Hendry had none at all. The rooms had the usual wealth of pseudo-oak and horse brasses, there were imitation candles in sconces, and red-and-white check table-cloths, and the waitresses were very pretty and very polite. Diana did her own flower arrangements (for which Hendry was always complimented). It was difficult to get a table without booking, for the Caraval

stood on a main road leading out of London, and was generally packed. The Gala Room, Hal realised, was a new addition. It must have been that derelict warehouse his mother was talking about, that Diana had converted. . . .

'Such a comfort to have seen you personally.' The couple were shaking hands with Diana, and preparing to go. 'Oh, your husband seems to have gone. It doesn't matter, does it?'

'Good-bye, Mrs. Carter. Let me have the estimate by the first. I'm sure Sheila will be delighted, anyway.'

'Good-bye, Mrs. Carrington, Mr. Carrington. Leave everything to me.' It was the first time Hal had heard her voice, and he was surprised again. He'd credited Diana with a harsh voice, and this was a low and extremely pleasant one, though it obviously belonged to a woman who could be very tough if necessary. Diana showed the couple out, came back to the bar to say something to the girl behind it, and gave the two young men a smile and a Good Morning as she passed them. Hal noted her tailored dark suit, her triple row of high pearls, gleaming black hair and high, plain shoes. There was nothing on her hands but a wedding ring. His father's ring, Hal supposed. What poise, he thought enviously. He felt brash and clumsy beside her. He was hardly taller.

'What a chassis!' It wasn't clear whether his friend was still talking about his car, or not. 'Did you see her move? I must say a woman of thirty does something to me that . . . a girl of my own age doesn't.' He finished his beer.

'Very profound,' conceded Hal. 'As a matter of fact, she's thirty-seven.' He watched her out of sight.

'Good Lord. I say, do you know her?'

'We've never met. But she happens to be my father's fourth wife. Or wife that was.'

'Oh, I say . . . I say.' But suddenly neither of them had anything to say. Hal already regretted the confidence: his friend was silenced by the implication of it. They drank up and went out to the car park under the Caraval's

swinging sign, where the new little red car awaited them.

Hendry was no longer happy. It took him a long time to realise it, but when he did, he was bitter and puzzled. He'd never understood how a car ride years ago with his father's young wife had brought him to the Caraval, where he worked an eighteen-hour day, always on call, ordering fish for the kitchen or barrels for the cellar, just a dogsbody, and doing it all for a small wage he didn't need. He was sure only of one thing: it was Diana's fault. The endless work, his father's anger, his expulsion from Beresford (known derisively as his resignation). Diana should have spoken up and exonerated him years ago, but instead she had made him her partner and servant. She was a devilish woman. He obeyed her, of course, because she scared him. He admired her—he was used to hearing her admired, and it was catching. But deep inside, he hated her for what he had become. If he despised himself secretly, Diana despised him openly, and the Caraval took its cue from her. The novelty of playing at landlord had long worn off.

He was thinking about it one day as he put detergent through the beer pumps—a messy, unrewarding job that doomed him to the cellar one afternoon a week. He would revolt against Diana. Or at least make a gesture. It was high time. His hair was thinning, and his indoor life had given him an early paunch. He went off to find her.

'You're unkind to me, Diana,' he burst out suddenly. 'Why should I stay here? Do all this? Other women weren't unkind to me!'

'What's that? Well, perhaps you didn't compromise other women. You're very useful here, and I can't see anyone else employing you.'

Hendry gulped resentfully. He wanted to say that it wasn't alternative employment he sought. He wanted to enjoy his unearned income, indulge his tastes, be free of

ties. And free of her. 'I didn't compromise you. At least, I never meant to——'

'Oh, Hendry, we thrashed that out years ago. Try and forget it now.' She spoke absently, moving her finger down a column of figures, as if the subject no longer merited her attention, and he mustn't bother her. 'Send the chef to see me before he goes off, will you?' They were in the office that led off the dining-room, and Diana was going through the accounts. The profits were excellent. The company had thought the Caraval's trade would be seasonal, and she had proved them wrong! Now she'd been offered a transfer to a bigger management in the West End. She'd investigate it before mentioning it to Hendry. There was no point in talking till she'd decided, herself. She'd thought of dismissing Hendry once. But his usefulness outweighed his nuisance value. The big management jobs went to couples, not to deserted women. 'Don't stand there in the doorway. Find the chef.'

Hendry started off on her errand, then sat down at the nearest table to mark his rebellion with a leisurely cigarette. But the case his father had given him long ago was empty, and the cigarettes were locked up, and Diana had the keys. . . . Never mind. He still wouldn't find the chef. Let others run her messages. He was the manager, wasn't he?

He tried to think out what he was going to do, and no ideas came. He was angry. And inside he was frightened. Warm waves of self-pity washed over him. He began to tear a menu into very tiny pieces.

Hendry, before he involved himself with Diana, had been a spoilt and disgruntled young man. He had no particular vices—but no virtues, either. He was perfectly negative. It hadn't really mattered, as long as he stayed at the foundry, in his specially tailored job, and Connell and Bryce nursed him along, and never complained overtly to his father. His foibles and precious interests were tolerated, if not admired. He had neither his father's courage, nor his personality. Vivian so hated competition that he'd

not been encouraged, as a youth, to develop any. But he had the wit to realise that whatever the future held for Diana, it held nothing at all for him. He would have been very happy to have been forgiven by Vivian, but Diana wouldn't let him.

'My dear, we don't need Vivian. He's unimportant. We're a success on our own!' It meant so much to her, and nothing at all to him.

He couldn't say, But it's your success! I'm sick of being your stooge. I want to go home.

With his money, his mild but not displeasing person, he ought to have had a wonderful time, he thought crossly. Other women would be kinder, less critical, less ambitious. One of them might even marry him, and protect him from Diana for ever! He even began to think nostalgically of the hated Midlands. He'd had time there for books, poetry, gramophone records, wine with his friends, and trips to Paris with little showgirls who were kindness itself. And now he had nothing. Except the nominal management of a restaurant, and the prospect of slavery till death's release. The menu was confetti in and around the ash-tray, and Hendry's eyes were full of tears.

'Wasted! All my life . . . wasted.' He told the empty room. 'My talents useless. My future mortgaged. My whole life paralysed. And I'm going bald, too!' He buried his head in his hands.

There was a noise at the door. 'Excuse me, sir. Sorry to move you.' Two workmen were bringing trestle tables through the room. Almost before Hendry stood up, they'd pulled his chair away and pushed his table back. Annoyed, he asked what they were doing.

'Private party in the Gala Room.'

'Oh. . . . Well, Mrs. Carter makes those arrangements. She didn't tell me.' Diana never told him anything, but that was beside the point.

'That's right. Birthday party for Mrs. Carter's daughter. Mind if we leave the doors open? We've got to take the chairs up.'

" 'But there's a howling draught——' Bits of menu had already started round the floor. The head-waiter would be furious. 'He wouldn't scruple to say so. Hendry shivered.

It was known that Mrs. Carter had a daughter by a previous marriage, though Alice had never so far appeared at the Caraval. Nobody even gives me the credit for that, Hendry thought bitterly. Not that he wanted to be Alice's father, really. And I can't even sit down in my own restaurant without being disturbed by Diana's minions. I thought we let the Gala Room for money—it cost enough to convert. I suppose she and Prinny planned it. Spoilt brat! Why can't she have a tea-party at home? He couldn't see why Alice, whom he still thought of as ten years old, had to have the new Gala Room that night. Champagne for Alice, indeed! Alice would have been typing in an office somewhere, if Diana hadn't got hold of his father. Just because she had, he'd have to dress up and hand round food and open champagne and be polite to Prinny (whom he feared and loathed) and his cocky young stepbrother, Hal.

He looked at the clock, which said twenty past three, the hour when nothing ever happens. As a matter of fact, something had happened, though Hendry had no premonition of it, at the time. Vivian had a stroke on the afternoon of Alice's eighteenth birthday.

CHAPTER IX

As Alice grew up, Prinny became the first person in her affections, and Prinny's house her home. She was still fond of, and very loyal to, her mother—despite what she politely called her 'trouble' and Vivian's friends called by another name. But she was no diplomat. She could no more conceal her feelings about Hendry than about Hal. Prinny had kept her away from the Caraval during her schooldays, and was amused to find she imagined it a cross between Hollywood and a den of vice.

'But it's just a restaurant. You've been in dozens such.'

'I know.' Alice sounded uncomfortable. 'Oh, I don't believe it really——'

Prinny privately decided that the best way of exploding that myth would be a sedate family luncheon there. After all, Hendry appeared at his best when on duty, and Diana always to her advantage. And then Diana telephoned, and asked if she might give a rather special party for Alice's birthday.

'By all means, Diana. But the drawing-room's rather small. I was just going to have it repainted. Will they want to dance?'

'I wasn't really thinking of you turning your house upside down. I've opened a new room at the Caraval. There's a sprung floor and a three-piece band, and no difficulty about food. The chef can make the cake. He fancies himself on cakes——'

It was so perfectly reasonable that Prinny gave in. This wasn't the runaway Diana, without a pound to her name or a room to sleep in. It was Diana Carter who ran the Caraval so successfully, who'd made good, and was asking to give her daughter a party.

Alice was thrilled and then scared. 'Darling, how heavenly. . . . Oh! Will Hendry be there? What shall I wear? You'll be there with me, won't you? Does anyone make a speech?'

Preparations for the party strained Prinny's neutrality to its utmost. Burying hatchets was fine, but she had to coach the principals in their parts. She briefed Alice on behaving to Hendry, and Hal (in rather stronger terms) on behaving to his stepbrother.

'I can't stand the oaf. You know I can't.' Hal was unco-operative.

'Dear boy, you must—for Alice's sake. Everyone knows somebody they can't stand. Poor Diana's set her heart on it.'

'You forget I've never met Diana.' He blushed guiltily as he remembered feasting his eyes on her at the Caraval. 'At least, I may have seen her. We haven't been introduced.'

'Then it's time you were. There's nothing sillier than family quarrels carried into the next generation.'

'Mother! She isn't going to get Vivian there, in a bath-chair, proposing the poor girl's health, is she?'

'It's physically impossible. But if he were there, I'd expect you to be polite to him. It's not for you to put Vivian in his place, whatever he's done. Or Hendry, either!'

'Like hell,' growled Hal, his face still scarlet. He was dark, like his father, and square-shouldered, like his Australian grandfather. High-spirited, generous and tactless. He had little of the Carters in his face (for which his mother was thankful; she'd had enough of Vivian in her life, without his living memorial tearing round the house), certainly not the polish and disenchantment that had captivated a younger Prinny. Vivian had actually finished his education with a Grand Tour abroad. With his racing triumphs, his war record still remembered, he'd been a dazzling figure when Prinny met him. Over the crest already, perhaps, but wonderfully impressive. ('I

can't tell you what Vivian's *like*, Dad—except that he wouldn't be possible outside of Europe!')

Hal said, 'I'm going out to Queensland. I hate my relations. I don't see why I should fall over backwards being nice to Diana and her paramour. Not that I care about their living in sin,' he added grandly.

'They're living in the dullest respectability, by all accounts. And working very hard. Now put your duds out for Connie to press, and for Pete's sake be nice to Alice. You know how upset she gets—and it's her day.'

A picture of Alice's face, pink and white, and eager as a puppy's, haunted Hal as he dressed. He'd had various girl-friends, all older than he was, which he hadn't taken seriously, and poor Alice had. But only Connie knew of the tear-wet pillow-cases in the morning, and her diary, though it had a lock, had been stuffed into the boiler as being too *loved* to be read. Hal really meant to go to Queensland, and be a farmer. He was just enjoying a few months' grace before beginning a lot of unspectacular hard work. He had friends, and a new car, and he hadn't seen much of Alice lately. She was always at home, available, if he wanted her. Or so he'd thought, till a friend of his, calling for him, caught sight of her in her pink dress and exclaimed, 'That's not your sister? But she's perfectly lovely!'

'No, she isn't. . . . Is she, do you think?'

'Yes,' said the enterprising friend. 'I think I'll ask her for a date. You've no objection, I take it?'

'Yes, I have!' Hal's voice was loud, and his face unsmiling, and the friend desisted. 'She—er—she never dates.'

Now he was fumbling with his tie—because of Alice Kimmidge. He was going to meet the redoubtable Diana, and be polite to Hendry—because of Alice. There were flowers and presents, and eating and drinking—for Alice. Alice was Someone Who Mattered. Everyone would want to talk to her, dance with her. . . . For the first time, Hal didn't feel quite so sure of himself. Supposing Alice wasn't

available to him? Supposing she cast her smiles elsewhere? Prinny, adjusting his tie under a very pink and twice-shaved chin, guessed; and grinned. Was I ever as young as that? she wondered, as she dressed. No, I can't have been. No woman ever is!

Alice was the star of her own party. Nobody else wanted quite so much to please, or succeeded so admirably. She wore a soft white dress and fresh flowers, Prinny's gift on one wrist, and her mother's on the other. Her happiness gave her beauty, even if it was only a loan for the evening. Her eyes shone, her lips were half-way to a smile. She was grown-up at last—here was the public acknowledgment of it! Prinny beamed kindly at her, her mother looked proud—even Hendry, whom she hadn't wanted to meet—seemed innocuous and quite charming. She didn't dare look at Hal, and she couldn't take her eyes off him when he was safely talking to someone else. He'd danced with her once: then politeness required them both to circulate.

Prinny looked magnificent in bronze lace, her full face glowing under her curious grey hair. 'A mother chicken,' Diana thought, watching her give Alice a little secret signal of encouragement. 'A tower of strength,' Alice acknowledged gratefully. She was sensible enough to know how much she owed to Prinny's intervention years ago. Prinny had brought the blaze of her personality to thaw out any possible awkwardness between the stepbrothers. But the geography of the room, as well as their own inclination, kept them apart. If one hadn't known the hostess was Diana, one wouldn't have looked beyond Prinny Lunt. People crowded round her, as to a fire.

Diana, in rustling black, looked fashionable, and somehow unapproachable, as if she'd come to the wrong party and ought to be backstage in the West End, with some very clever people indeed. As a matter of fact, she was feeling just what every young mother confronted with a pretty grown-up daughter must feel: so big, so soon! She felt like running to a mirror to know the worst. Since she

hadn't the natural escort of a husband beside her, she turned away to friends.

She'd embraced Alice and Prinny affectionately, shaken hands with Hal, and conquered him as suddenly as she'd conquered his father. She was delighted to find Alice so pretty, so much prettier than she'd ever dared hope. She wanted to say, 'Thank you for everything' to Prinny, but this wasn't the time and place. She touched her arm shyly, and Prinny's wink told her she was understood.

To Hal she said, 'Hallo at last! How nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you, it's like meeting a friend.' What an improvement on Hendry, she added to herself. Prinny's right to be proud of him. Poor Vivian! For the first time she thought how poor Vivian really was, turning all the people who might have loved him out of his life.

'I've heard a lot about you, too——' Hal stopped short. Supposing she took it to mean something unpleasant. 'Alice talks so much, you know. . . .'

Diana had a shrewd idea that her daughter never mentioned her nowadays, but she gave him her lovely smile. 'I'm sure you make one happy family. It's so nice for her.' The idea of this youngster as her future son-in-law never entered her head.

Hendry (warned by Diana as Hal had been by Prinny) shook hands with his stepbrother, and melted away to the bar. Most of the women were schoolgirls. Or their mothers. And what a noise they made, giggling and 'lling to each other. Hendry thought it was a rotten party. There was no shapely and understanding blonde to single him out, and make sure he enjoyed himself. They were throwing streamers across the room now, lassoing each other and trampling them underfoot. Hendry tore the coloured ribbons off his shoulders angrily. He pushed his glass across the bar. 'Give me another scotch, Joe. Make it a double.'

Joe (a discovery, of course, of Diana's) beamed sentimentally out of his wrinkled seaman's face. 'Lovely to

see 'em enjoying themselves, isn't it, sir? Takes us old 'uns back.' He moved a length of streamer from Hendry's drink, and pushed it back to him.

A fitful squib of vengeance spluttered inside Hendry Carter. He must, he could, score off Diana to-night. She was hostess, she had her hands full—here was his chance. He knocked back some more drinks to give himself courage. The party was warming up—why shouldn't he?

'Hallo!' Alice, all pink and white and smiling, was at his elbow. She wanted to dance with Hal, but she knew she must say something pleasant to each of her guests. Whether Hendry was a guest, or a host with her mother, she wasn't sure. But he was old enough to be her father, and he looked so lonely at the bar. 'Thank you so much for the present,' she began primly. 'I adore blue.'

Hendry had no idea what present Diana might have given her in his name, but he seized his advantage. 'It's your colour. The colour for June skies and little she-angels and pussycats' bows. It matches your eyes.'

'My eyes are grey.' Alice looked astounded. Even the passport office had had no difficulty there. 'Like my father's——'

'Let me see.' Gently, Hendry took her chin in his hand and tilted it to the light. 'Blue. Blue as a March morning in Italy. Ever been to Italy?'

'No, I haven't.' Hendry was rather like Alice remembered Vivian, only she wasn't frightened of him. Old, of course—he must be nearly forty—but really quite a dear. She smiled at him. 'You must be colour blind.'

'Certainly not! I've rather an eye for colour——' The idea suddenly came to Hendry that he could punish Diana through this child. Flirt with her, hurt her, make her—or rather her mother—ridiculous before her friends. Of course, Alice was the chink in Diana's armour! No wonder the poor child was never allowed out. 'Tell me, where has Prinny been hiding you all this time? Is she jealous?'

'Prinny, jealous? Prinny's a darling.' There was a

breathlessness in Alice's voice that should have warned him. Alice was inarticulate about the things that mattered most to her. Her grey eyes were searching the room for Hal, and they found him, dancing with a school friend of hers—a duty dance, she hoped. Only he was laughing down at his partner, unnecessarily attentive, and she couldn't catch his eye when he passed quite close. 'Prinny's like an aunt—more than an aunt. Well, you're my uncle-by-marriage, or something.' She hardly knew what she was saying. Hal was taking the girl to the far end of the bar, asking Joe for drinks.

'Dear Alice, I certainly don't feel related to you in the least!'

'You don't? I'm so glad——' After all, if Hendry didn't, why should Hal? She believed that it was because of the peculiar relationship between them that Hal hung back. He must have seen how she felt. She glared at two long glasses served to Hal and his partner. The girl's straw had broken, and Hal was giving her his. Oh, doomed birthday, wretched party! Hal wouldn't look at her. He was busy. And Hendry was still beside her, inquiring courteously if she was enjoying herself.

'Fine, thank you,' she choked. 'Fr, how are you doing?'

'The Caraval, you mean? It's doing famously—I'm told. I am told things occasionally, you know. But I am merely your mother's page-cum-steward. A person of small account.'

The sarcasm was lost on Alice. She giggled delight. 'ly. 'Oh, you'd look sweet in buttons, with a dear little hat. . . . No, please don't be cross——' For Hendry was looking very cross indeed. Nobody took him seriously, not even this child. He saw Diana laughing, not thinking about him, not caring whether he was enjoying himself—not even knowing whether he was there. He'd show her he was still in the room, at least.

'Dance with me,' he commanded.

'Oh, but I was just going . . . I sort of promised . . . ' Friends had joined Hal at the bar, and he was on the out-

side of the group, nearer her, edging away. She was sure he was going to ask her—but he didn't get the chance. Hendry suddenly seized her and steered her determinedly across the floor, past her mother. 'Ooh, not so fast! I mean . . . you dance awfully well, of course, it was just my dress——' Diana was looking at her with an expression she couldn't understand. A look of surprise . . . and something else.

The dance ended as abruptly as it had started. It hadn't been a dance at all, really. A sudden charge across the room, past the group where her mother was standing. Alice thought Hendry must be subject to whims, if not fits. It was neither gracious nor reasonable to push her across the room like that. She smoothed a fold in her dress. 'I must go. I've promised so many people——' Hal was disengaged, talking now to his mother. She'd run up and wait beside him till he'd finished, then he'd grin down at her and say, 'Think you can manage this one, Midge?'

No. She was Alice Kimmidge, eighteen years old, and she wouldn't chase any man. Nor await his pleasure. He could come and ask her, and await hers! Her own boldness amazed her, and she thought, I'll make him jealous! Supposing she let him see that she preferred Hendry, for instance, made him appreciate what he'd lost? Hal must notice her, to-night—if only to hate her! There is nothing more maddening than to suffer ignored. So she waved to Prinny, nodded coolly to Hal, who turned to look, and tucked an arm through Hendry's. 'I'd love an ice. Wouldn't you?'

'No. I stopped eating ices twenty years ago.' Hendry was still thinking about Diana. 'But I'll get you some champagne. It's the proper drink for a birthday.'

Alice hadn't tasted champagne since her mother's marriage to Vivian, and memories of that day crowded back with nausea. 'Oh, it's horrid, Hendry. No!'

'Don't be a baby, Alice. If you don't like champagne, try scotch.'

She was aware that her mother was staring at her, and Hal was looking furious, and a delicious little feeling of power tingled inside her. She laughed rather loudly at Hendry and said she'd love to try some. He gave her a glass and it tasted perfectly awful. Her cheeks grew hot and her throat tightened. To her dismay, her eyes filled with tears. Supposing people thought she was crying—because Hendry teased her? Because Hal wouldn't dance? 'I'm hot,' she gasped. 'Hot dancing . . . no air.' She felt him take her elbow and lead her outside.

Next thing, she was alone with Hendry in the ante-room, where a substantial supper was laid out to please the eye before it fortified the dancers. Lobsters gaped, sandwiches flaunted their triangles like truce flags, trifles arched roundly under their glaze of custard. Alice looked down the gay tables. Nothing as simple as a glass of water! She put a hand on the cool window-glass, but it grew warm instead of cooling her. Hendry was holding her other hand. He reckoned Diana had only to turn her head to see them through the open door. This was a situation he was prepared to savour to the full! The revolt (and doubtless the liberation, since Diana wouldn't want him around afterwards) of Hendry Carter. Diana would either see her daughter in his arms, and enjoying it: or she would have the agony of watching her protest!

It was a long time since Hendry had been so pleased with himself. The drinks had made him cheerful and careless, and he imagined Alice was impressed with him. If he'd known she was using him to bait Hal, as he was using her against her mother, he would have been appalled. One's own schemes are clever: other people's mere duplicity.

Suddenly he was kissing her roughly, for his technique had gained nothing with the years. "'Grow young with tides,'" he murmured happily. 'Herrick, my wench! Soft skin, delicious hair. . . . I'm like my father—I like them young and fresh!'

'Ouch!' She hadn't understood a word, but she stepped back and slapped his face—a fine, useless, theatrical slap. She'd always considered Hendry her mother's property. This had gone too far—and all to no purpose. Hal wasn't there. 'Don't you touch me. And . . . wipe my lipstick off.'

'Don't be an idiot. You're your mother's daughter, aren't you? Well, she isn't fussy. How do you think we keep this place full of satisfied customers—by smiling at them?' It was utter libel, invented in anger, but it was easy to hurt Alice. Tears were already choking her.

'You beast,' she spluttered. 'You horrid, vicious pig. Everything Prinny told me about you is true, then——' Sympathy for her mother, longing for Hal, disgust at her companion, shame at herself—she felt them all, and her face was contorted, like an outraged child's.

'Prinny'—retorted Hendry, bored at the switch of subject—'is a bitch. Your mother at least has temperament, but Prinny's a bitch. And look at the way she's let her figure go. Father's the most wonderful thing that ever happened to her——'

'Prinny'—Alice controlled herself suddenly—'never thinks about your father. Nor does Mummy. Not from one year's end to another. I never met anyone who does.' Vivian had faded out of her memory, a photograph never properly fixed.

'Oh, shut up drivelling and wipe your face.' Hendry selected a sandwich and popped it whole into his mouth. 'Fancy wasting caviare on you—God knows how much this party's costing the business—but that's your mother's affair, not mine.' If Diana hadn't witnessed her daughter's discomfiture, he wasn't going to bother with Alice, whose recoil was scarcely flattering. Besides, he wanted a drink after his sandwich. 'Go and find someone of your own age to play with. Go on—scram!'

But Alice stuck to her point. 'You called Prinny a bitch, and I won't have it——'

'You called my mother *what*, Carter?' Hal had at last

come to look for her. 'Midge, darling, go next door, will you? I want a word with Carter, here.'

She went, via the cloakroom, to the shelter of Prinny's side, much as Diana had sought asylum in her presence at her ill-starred marriage, years ago. Prinny and Diana were laughing together, and Prinny slipped an arm through hers and held her till Diana had finished what she was saying. 'There you are, Midge. We thought you'd disappeared. Feel strong enough to cut your cake yet?'

Diana just stared at her daughter, as at a stranger. Adding a remark of Prinny's to Alice's flushed face, she'd stumbled on to the truth. Alice, little Alice—her Midge! It just didn't seem possible. Love had by-passed her, for all her beauty, and chosen her daughter! Tears of outrage choked her, and feeling for Alice, her one-time baby, and . . . amusement. What had Prinny said to her once, seeking to comfort her? 'Something happens to every woman—but it isn't always a man!' In her own case, she'd meant her piano. Diana's something was the Caraval, the success and the friends it brought her, the satisfaction of a job well done. Alice's something was evidently this handsome youth that she'd met to-night. Her eyebrows shot up in a last incredulous gesture. Now I've seen everything! but her generous mouth managed a smile. Life would be easier for Alice than it had been for her. Fuller, perhaps—or not so full. Her daughter's dreams were all domestic. Dear Alice! Dear Hal—for loving Alice! There were tears in her eyes and laughter on her lips at the same time. She wanted to escape, to order her feelings privately, but Prinny had tucked an arm in hers, her bronze bulk anchoring Diana firmly in her place. 'You dare,' she whispered. 'This is Alice's day.'

Alice, unaware of anyone's emotion except her own, smiled the smile she felt she owed her mother and Prinny. Funny, she thought, they didn't quarrel about Vivian—but they quarrelled about me! She looked furtively over the paper-crowned heads towards the ante-room, whose door was ominously shut. It was a magnificent cake, and she

smiled gratefully at her mother, who'd provided it. 'It seems a pity to break it up.'

'Oh, go on, sausage—cut it!'

So Alice attacked her cake, sighing and smiling and not really looking what she was doing. Bells rang, birds sang. Hal had called her Darling. . . . The stones round Prinny's neck, on her own wrists, the chandeliers, the raised glasses, were jewels on fire.

There were faces round her, voices. All her guests were singing 'Happy birthday, dear Alice, happy birthday to you' as loud as they could. Hendry and Hal were missing, but everyone acted as if nothing had happened.

Perhaps Hendry was dying under the supper table . . . shot through the heart. . . . Perhaps Hal—but suddenly Hal was beside her, furtively straightening his jacket, singing louder than anyone, and reaching for her hand.

Alice never knew the outcome of Hal's 'word' with his stepbrother. When the party broke up, Hendry pushed past her, looking important, and began talking urgently to her mother. Alice saw his lip was swollen, and wondered, but Diana and Prinny listened unsmiling, among the flowers and balloons of the party. She heard Hendry say, 'This afternoon . . . in a coma. The doctor doesn't think . . .'

'Go along, by all means.' Diana was giving permission graciously, and at the same time making it clear that it wasn't anything that concerned herself. 'I don't like scenes. And he didn't ask for me.'

'He couldn't ask for anyone, it seems,' Prinny murmured. 'But I'm sure he'd feel better for an audience, if he knew.'

Alice, understanding slowly, wondered why Hal was pulling faces at his mother. 'You'd better go straight home in a taxi—I'm sure it's quicker.' He whistled one up and opened the door for her.

'Poor Vivian.' Alice was shocked. He was a horrid old man, but everyone was very callous about him. She was so full of him as she went downstairs that she didn't realise she was going home alone, with Hal.

They drove off together in his little sports car, and it was the worst performance it ever put up. Three hours to get from south London to Caterham Hill . . . but the happy Alice had no sense of being late at all.

When, for the second time that night, she was violently kissed, she was much too shaken to resist.

Vivian, in making his will, had forgiven no offence—real or imaginary—that he had ever received. The only bequests therefore were the servants' legacies, and a sum to found an annual motor race to bear his name.

He left the residue, which was considerable, 'to my step-daughter, Alice Mary Kimmidge, with the hope, but not the condition, that she may see fit to assume or add the name of Carter to her own.'